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INTRODUCTION



Dr. Keri Matwick

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We are excited to present the second volume of *Pioneer Road: Journal of Undergraduate Research*. Published annually, *Pioneer Road* showcases the best essays and research papers written during AY2021-2022 by students enrolled in courses in the Language and Communication Centre (LCC) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

In this issue, essays principally come from CC0001: Inquiry and Communication in an Interdisciplinary World. The assignments ask students to write an op-ed (short for “opposite the editorial page”), a piece usually found in a newspaper or magazine that expresses an author’s opinion. Students explore a topic of their choice, whether a place in Singapore, a community within Singapore, or their own writing practices. Following a close observation of their topics, students write a vivid rendering of it, ending with a tension that motivates further exploration. In the pursuit of inquiry, students find complex arguments of published authors that help them think through their questions, which they ultimately answer at the end.

We are grateful to our excellent editorial team, especially for the meticulous review by Ms. Er Bee Eng, and for the insightful guidance by the journal’s advisor, Dr. Angela Frattarola.

Enjoy reading!

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<https://blogs.ntu.edu.sg/pioneerroad/>



CC0001:

Inquiry and Communication in an Interdisciplinary World

(Previously HW0001: Communication: A Journey of Inquiry Through Writing and Speech)



CC0001

From Social-Distancing to Social-Life Distanced

Sridhar Haamsini

Transitioning into university life from high school is never easy, especially for international students. The COVID-19 pandemic, a global health crisis that turned lives upside down, only complicated matters. There was lack of clarity regarding the re-opening of universities, and moving to campus seemed a distant event. Travel was riskier and in-person meet ups were unimaginable. When asked about their concerns, a group of international students who had arrived in Singapore in 2020, responded that they had anticipations about mingling with a multi-cultural crowd, moving into hall life and exploring new clubs of their interest. In this scenario of uncertainty and lack of physical interactions, how was it possible to meet and make friends?

"It was time to break the perception: strangers online are dangerous." An international student explained, on sharing how she was adapting to the pandemic-driven student life. Social media was the only platform for meeting her first college buddies. However, students reported that it was no easy task to build relationships on social media due to difficulties in understanding one another. Even after arriving on campus, they had to hang out in groups of eight due to government restrictions for maintaining social distancing. In the months that followed, filled with apprehension and hope, it became clear that the new normal was here to stay.

The routes for meeting new individuals had become limited. Organised bonding meets and recreational activities, which are often considered to be the best way to meet new people in university, were virtual or cancelled.

Did all groups of students in general feel like they were moving apart? "Not really. Smaller groups also mean we can reinforce existing bonds," they say. With more time available to spend with each person, understanding between the students had improved. It also helped students to work on and strengthen their existing relationships. The common feeling of apprehension itself had established a link amongst students, wiping away differences. Whether one studied a different course or came from a different city did not matter. All the students were experiencing the uncertainty looming over their student lives together and that itself brought them closer to each other.

Students continue to manage vibrant conversations and an optimistic attitude that things will get better. However, their responses highlight that the online interactions were no substitute for the in-person experience. With people often masking their true identity behind their gadget screens, it was much more difficult to judge people on social media. Thus, students are to make the best of what they have.

Fewer opportunities to meet new people means that they are forced to move with diverse people and not be choosy about their interactions. In many ways, such experiences will make interactions more enriching. Large gatherings are no longer taken for granted and people who have been a part of them have become more important. Thus, the in-person meet-ups of the current scenario are different from those of the pre-pandemic world. They have become much more complex and have two dimensions to them. This raises the question: how has the pandemic impacted social relationships among students?

An article from *The Washington Post* noted many respondents admitting that during the pandemic, they preferred to maintain a smaller social circle (Bonos, 2021). "Some who once tried to maintain dozens of friendships are realizing they're more fulfilled while keeping up with just their nearest and dearest" (Bonos, 2021, p.6). The pandemic had also led to people prioritizing certain relations. "After over a year of living through an extended state of emergency, it's clear who's in your ride-or-die crew, who you can call if you need a walk, a talk or some help" (Bonos, 2021, p.6). The author Bonos (2021) also cites friendship expert, Shasta Nelson, who explains that smaller, closer circles have also been more helpful in this pandemic. They might even make people hesitant about having an active and vibrant social life if and when the pandemic ends, Nelson adds.

Bonos (2021) brings to light the fact that the pandemic might have not distanced students as we assume it has. With fewer opportunities to socialize, students find themselves spending greater time

valuing their current connections and focusing on deepening them. They are grateful to those who supported and helped them during the pandemic and consider them more important. These behavioural changes may also last beyond the pandemic. But can we generalise this kind of impact across people of all natures? Outgoing individuals may still prefer to move with larger groups and meet more people; that is, social nature of individuals may not necessarily change and even if it does, the change may not necessarily sustain.

In an article from the *BBC*, journalist Ribeiro (2020) elaborates on research conducted by Dr. Marlee Bower, a loneliness researcher from the University of Sydney, and sociologist Dr. Roger Patulny from the University of Wollongong. The research pointed out that during the pandemic people had begun to interact with fewer others and were more focussed on their existing relationships. Dr. Bower adds that, "They (respondents in the survey) would socialise with not as many people as before, but rather a very particular sub-group," (p.5). Additionally, only certain kinds of relationships could be sustained through online platforms, such as those built on the basis of similarities or ones that were already deep and personal. But, with increased online interactions in the pandemic, online platforms had also facilitated the connection between people who weren't in physical proximity. However, Ribeiro (2020) also cites a second loneliness expert Michelle Lim according to whom, "for most people, both the loss of micro-interactions and the narrowing of their social networks are temporary, tied directly to the public health emergency (pandemic), and are unlikely to outlast it" (p.18).

The research also highlighted that smaller social networks had become the focus of social life in the pandemic. The fact that an understanding already existed might be the reason why these existing relations were easier to maintain online as well. Online interactions also added another aspect to social life which was increased interactions with those who lived across the world. This means that distance was no longer a barrier to developing and maintaining relations. This implies that networks can and are still being expanded amidst the pandemic, contradictory to the understanding that social circles have diminished in this period. Another finding is that we may see such behaviour only as long as social distancing measures continue to exist. When face to face interactions once again become prominent, we will return to normalcy. While this is not certain, we can say that the pandemic may have taught students better ways of interaction and to have the best experiences.

Bonos (2021) and Bower and Patulny (Ribiero, 2020) seem to agree that relationships have become deeper and valued through the pandemic. On the other hand, they are divided on the stance as to whether prioritizing certain relationships has diminished social circles. While Bonos (2021) believes that social circles are becoming smaller, Bower and Patulny (Ribiero, 2020) argue that the online experience has also expanded networks. Another point of contention arises regarding the how long we may see these behavioural changes brought about by the pandemic. However, is this something that can be predicted? Humans are dynamic beings and constantly adapt to change. Depending on how long and in what forms these changes last, they cope in a way that best suits

them. Whether these pandemic-induced modifications will prolong is purely circumstantial. It depends on what students valued in the pre-pandemic world and what they take away from the pandemic period. Behavioural adaptions may or may not last but lessons learnt certainly will.

To sum up, what the pandemic seems to have done is to break barriers between students and facilitate interactions. Petty differences no longer seem important and can no longer be the basis for tensions in relationships; rather the relationship and the person are what are valued. Additionally, I feel that the pandemic has also taught students to start the first conversations and form strong bonds from the start. For international students, the entire experience of settling down and building relationships in a new place has been further enriched by new learnings from facing new kinds of uncertainties and challenges thrown by the pandemic. Whether these changes are permanent or not is a question in the future. However, with uncertainty underlining everything we do, the question holds no importance as the best we can do is to support each other and stand united in these challenging times.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to my professor, Dr. Shan Ross for her continuous guidance throughout the writing of this op-ed. Her feedback and comments were most valuable and I will definitely carry them forward in my future writing. I would also like to thank my family and friends for all their help and support.

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CC0001

Finding Space in Singapore's Public Space

Kaelyn Chua Shu En

Nestled in the north-eastern tip of Singapore lies a charming row of old shipping containers that make up the Punggol Container Park. The rustic shipping containers line the dining street and house seven unique eateries offering a large array of different affordable cuisines. Picturesque lights hang over the alfresco dining areas, perfectly complementing the view of the lush foliage that lies behind the park.

On a Saturday night, it's no surprise that the park is bustling with people, but it might not be the kind of crowd you'd expect.

Unique photogenic social spaces in Singapore are often clustered in the Central Area near the likes of Orchard Road and Marina Bay. Events and restaurants in this area tend to carry a hefty price tag and hence are typically reserved for more special occasions such as date nights or birthdays. At Punggol Container Park, this wasn't really the case. The beautiful park was filled with families and friends dressed in casual home attire or even exercise gear. For them, it felt as ordinary as a casual night out at their neighbourhood hawker centre or coffee shop. For me, I felt almost like a tourist, overdressed with my clunky DSLR camera in hand.

There was something to be said about how ordinary the Punggol Container Park was to the average

Punggol resident, despite how special its infrastructure was. The Park essentially embodied what Francis Tibbalds, author of "Making People-friendly Towns" (1993), thought a successful public place should be, "a rich, vibrant, mixed-use environment, that does not die at night or at weekends and is visually stimulating and attractive to residents and visitors alike."

It's not very common to find public spaces like this in Singapore that present a unique and pleasant experience outside the Central Area. In his journal entry titled "The problem of public space: Singapore as case study" (2016), Joshua Comaroff described Singapore's national landscape as a laboratory of "willed ugliness," where "aesthetic and social banality is designed at a micro-level." Considering the importance of a community-centric approach in placemaking, Singapore could certainly stand to benefit from more vibrant public spaces like the Punggol Container Park that foster a unique sense of place. This left me to wonder: What kind of placemaking efforts contribute to the vibrancy and conviviality of a place?

In her working paper, "Creative Placemaking" (2018), Yulia Pak attributes the "sterility" of public spaces in Singapore to a few factors. Some of which are the government's "domineering" role in

developing spaces and their heavy emphasis on private stakeholders' engagement through (co)funding placemaking efforts (Pak, 2018, p.17). Pak (2018) recognises that these efforts have been successful in bringing global recognition to Singapore's architecture and infrastructure as evidenced by iconic landmarks like the Marina Bay Sands and the Gardens by The Bay. However, she believes that there remains a crucial lack of community-centric engagement which has left our public spaces feeling over-regulated and too carefully manicured (Pak, 2018, p.10).

It's worth noting that Pak does indeed acknowledge that the Urban Redevelopment Agency (URA) tries to execute an idea of placemaking as, "a coordinated, multistakeholder approach to improving precincts and making them more attractive for the benefits of its users." Although the essence of the idea is promising, she is critical of the fact that the majority of current placemaking efforts still pander towards improving Singapore's international image, rather than its local one. Singapore's past placemaking strategies have had a "pronounced emphasis" on shaping spaces with the intention of appealing to visitors and fostering a positive image for "easy international consumption" (Pak, 2018, p.6). This pursuit of aggressive economic growth through the global cultural economy has naturally led to a disconnect between people and their public spaces, resulting in the absence of a sense of belonging and emotional connection amongst Singaporean youths.

Essentially, the issue is not that Singapore lacks public spaces, but instead about what public spaces in Singapore lack. The answer to that is rather

complicated, but one prominent aspect is that many public spaces in Singapore lack conviviality: the quality of being lively and friendly.

In his book, *Convivial Urban Spaces* (2008), Henry Shafteo coined the term "convivial spaces" to describe open, public locations where citizens can gather, linger, or wander through. He elaborates that conviviality is "a subjective feeling, underpinned by, but not to be confused with, the actual physical state of a place" (Shafteo, 2008, p.7). Although Shafteo (2008) believes that there is no single blueprint for a convivial space, there are a few common shared elements amongst successful public spaces such as accessibility, openness, and aesthetics. But at its core, beyond these physical yardsticks, people should feel welcomed in convivial spaces.

The Punggol Container Park embodies this spirit well. The Park is a Social Entrepreneurship and Eco-Park Development, designed to be an integrated social playground for community exchange and a platform for showcasing innovative and inclusive solutions to social challenges (*Social Entrepreneurship and Eco-Park Development*, 2016). This principle is reflected in the park's vibrant dining street that not only carries a distinct charm, but also serves to benefit the community. The seven eateries operate on a social enterprise business model that places equal emphasis on generating both social and economic value (*Social Enterprise Business Models*, 2021), keeping prices affordable and inclusive for the surrounding community. It's simply an open, aesthetic, and casual space for various demographics of people within the neighbourhood to meet, socialise and forge

intimate connections.

A major part of the Punggol Container Park's allure lies in its locality, where the park is relatively inaccessible for those living outside the town's vicinity but incredibly convenient for Punggol residents. It's located a short five-minute walk away from the Riviera LRT station and lies adjacent to a park connector, making it a popular pitstop for neighbourhood joggers and cyclists. The locality of the park makes for an intimate shared experience for Punggol residents who frequent it often, developing a special bond between them; a geographically bound pride that pulls them together. This sense of space gives Punggol residents something to come back to—a physical representation of their connections to their neighbourhood. Shaftoe (2008) believes that without such convivial spaces, cities would be "mere accretion of buildings with no deliberate opportunities for casual encounters and positive interactions between friends or strangers" (p.5).

Since 2008, the Singapore government has been engaged in a concerted effort to placemake Singapore into a culturally vibrant cityscape with "heart and soul" (Hoe & Liu, 2016, p.3). While these efforts have paid off in the Central Area which now feature several memorable landmarks, the same can't be said about our heartlands. As the name entails, the heartlands house what makes up the core of our nation—the people. However, most of these heartlands lack convivial spaces that truly serve the needs and interests of the resident community. Instead, commercial malls like Bedok Mall, NEX and JEM form the spaces that residents frequent the most, contributing to the disconnect between Singaporeans and their spaces. The reality

is that developing iconic landmarks and large-scale malls simply isn't enough to keep Singaporeans grounded. For a city to feel like home, communities need spaces that they can call their own; a small part of our small state where genuine community ownership has a chance to grow.

As a land-scarce country where the only constant is change, it's important to give people something to hold on to. While it's tempting to focus on more tangible aspects like economic gains and our international reputation, I believe we trade away something invaluable when we undermine the crucial role that convivial spaces play in adding depth and authenticity to daily life. Spaces like the Punggol Container Park serve as a vital visible reminder of public sociability, a glimmer of hope as to what our public spaces could look like should we choose to make conviviality and community a priority in our placemaking strategies.

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CC0001

Interweaving History and Nature in Singapore

Milcah Sze Hui Feng

As the ferry sailed closer, the picturesque view of a dense forest resting behind a beach slowly emerged in a distance. Upon reaching St. John's Island, I was welcomed by the familiar fragrance of the sea. Man-made breakwaters guarded the coast as gentle waves graced the surrounding serenity. Tourists sunbathed beside pigeons that were doing the same. Several crab holes dotted the shoreline, and remnants of past animal life were embedded in numerous rocks. The patterned carvings on the seawall from erosion, and the rhythmic sketching on the shore with sediments by the waves provided an unrestricted gallery showcasing Nature's masterpieces. Yet, this was just a fraction of the island's rich biodiversity. From the resilient roots of the mangroves to the broad branches of the endangered *Streblus elongatus*¹ shading visitors from the blistering sun, each tree in this forest haven possessed its unique characteristic. Some were encircled by vines while others had trunks with rough trench-like textures. Surrounding them were birds playing chase and crickets performing their mating calls. Immersing in such an environment was therapeutic, and I was pleased to spot efforts in forest maintenance throughout the island, with sights of newly planted saplings,

labelled trunks, as well as neatly arranged chopped logs as a barrier to prevent surface runoff from steep slopes to flow onto the walkway.

However, to my dismay, the tranquillity was rudely interrupted by deafening sounds of air vents from the nearby Marine Aquaculture Centre. Its concrete premises with small shrubs neatly planted beside the path resembled mainland Singapore. The absence of natural shade from the sun (implying deforestation prior to its construction) and the incessant jarring noise soon drove me back into the comforts of the forest. This left me puzzled over the centre's environmental conservation objectives and concerned over the effects that its intrusive activities might have on the island's wildlife.

As my exploration continued, I noticed the aged buildings bordering the forest. Some restricted public access, while others were partially demolished with tattered construction canvases barely covering the remaining skeletal structure. The signboards in their vicinity answered my unspoken curiosity on the purposes these buildings served previously. According to what was written, these infrastructures, built between 1800 and 1950,

¹ Also known as Tempinis tree

were formerly used for cholera quarantine, opium rehabilitation and prison detention. Finally, situated at the end of the forest was a deserted basketball court. Decomposition of organic matter painted the area with patches of deep orange. Puddles of stagnant water in the court were a hotspot that housed algae and mosquitoes, symbolic of the island's past duty to accommodate the undesired population. It was only after 1975 that this dreaded island was recognised for its rich biodiversity, kickstarting the establishment of its present nature conservation efforts (Balamurugan, 2002, p.4).

St. John's Island is representative of Singapore's desire for ecological preservation. Yet, it also reflects the challenge in maintaining a delicate balance between history and nature when achieving environmental goals. Following the principle of removing the past for the future, old buildings need to be cleared for modern environmental conservation facilities. The precedence of environmental conservation over historical preservation have resulted in contrasting attitudes toward nature and history, exemplified by the well-preserved forest and Marine Aquaculture Centre juxtaposed with the neglected historical buildings on the island. This disturbing discovery made me wonder: Are nature and history always in conflict? Could they be interconnected in some way?

Tom Griffiths, a researcher on environmental history, explores the intricate relationship between history and nature in his article "History and natural history: Conservation movements in conflict?" (1991). Griffiths (1991) first sets the context of his writing with the popular notions of "deep ecology" that emphasise biodiversity rather than humans

(p.18). Thus, society has always believed that nature and historical preservation are at odds, and that environmental conservation should exclude human history. He then pinpoints "aesthetics" as the main driver of conflict since the past is usually considered an eyesore in contrast to nature's beauty (p.21). Hence, historical significance of natural landscapes remains vague and ignored, resulting in history and nature being perceived as two mutually exclusive entities. Griffiths (1991), however, holds a different perspective. Introducing the phrase "cultural landscapes" to describe places where nature and history converge and hold paramount significance (p.29), he recognises that history and nature inherently have no conflict and are instead interconnected (p.23). He expounds that land preservation, through the demolition of historical buildings, is an act of "stripping back [the] later layers of history [to] recover an earlier ideal time" before human civilisation (Griffiths, 1991, p.22). This implies that historical and nature preservation are inevitably intertwined, and they co-exist.

Although Griffiths wrote this article in 1991, it remains useful in understanding how nature and history remain misunderstood today as antithetical entities when they are, in fact, interrelated. Moreover, his analysis of how removing old buildings for nature conservation revives the distant past of landscapes before human development challenged my initial disapproval of demolition. However, I argue that this analogy seems to justify the apathy of extreme nature conservationists who demolish existing historical monuments that hold the very essence of history itself. Yet, the impending climate crisis is forcing us to accelerate our efforts

to protect biodiversity, making historical preservation seem less important than environmental conservation. With this dilemma, to what extent is preserving historical monuments still necessary in light of Singapore's pressing nature conservation goals?

Tai Wei Lim's (2017) book *Cultural Heritage and Peripheral Spaces in Singapore* attempts to answer this question. As a historian, Lim (2017) provides insights into how historical preservation is imperative in Singapore's pursuit of environmental conservation. Acknowledging that Singapore's history is found in its natural landscapes, Lim (2017) investigates the historical and cultural stories behind Singapore's parks, trails, and forests (p.2). He emphasises that placing historical monuments in preserved natural landscapes help trigger "nostalgia" in visitors (p.4), and they "interpret the use of these [historical and ecological] spaces subjectively" (p.3). Citing examples of the Fort Canning Park and Tiong Bahru trail, Lim (2017) notes that this "nostalgia" is usually evoked with the help of educational boards in these cultural landscapes that bridge understanding for visitors to empathise with the past (p.6). Lim (2017) concludes that understanding the development of these landscapes through Singapore's history would increase our appreciation for nature and, in turn, safeguard its historical value altogether.

Lim (2017) highlights the role of historical monuments in enabling us to forge a deeper connection and reverence for nature, which would strengthen individual desire for nature preservation, and hence motivate more bottom-up environmental initiatives. Moreover, the respect

evoked by history will also urge us to be more environmentally conscious and minimise nature-intrusive development policies. This is evident in the Nature Society (Singapore)'s petition against plans for roadbuilding in Bukit Brown Cemetery in 2011, which would have damaged the surrounding biodiversity (Cho & Kriz̄nik, 2017, p.96). The organisation recognised the need to maintain the environmental integrity of the cemetery as a form of respect to Singapore's ancestors (p.96). This reinforces the necessity of historical preservation and appreciation in Singapore's nature conservation goals.

Lim (2017) furthers Griffiths' argument (1991) by asserting that history and nature are more than interconnected; they are symbiotic. However, Griffiths warns that this delicate relationship can be easily severed if there is excessive emphasis on environmental "aesthetics". Building on both writings, I believe that the combination of both nature's "aesthetics" and history's "nostalgia" is key to integrating sustainable development in Singapore. This is because nature's beauty provides us with a therapeutic retreat from our hectic lifestyle, while history makes us realise that nature is a keeper of our Singaporean identity. Together, they reinforce the exigency to refine our current profit-driven economic approach that is environmentally damaging and establish a sustainable one where nature is protected and thrives. Therefore, regardless of how urgent contemporary environmental conservation may become, our past must not be disregarded as it is an indispensable factor for a sustainable future.

As the ferry headed back to mainland Singapore and

the scenic view of the island slowly faded into the sea, what lingered within me was a sense of gratitude towards the island for sheltering the diseased, addicts and persecuted. Singapore will continue to progress towards sustainability and uphold our reputation as a Garden City, but our history that has silently accompanied nature for centuries must remain rooted and celebrated in these natural landscapes in order for the interwoven story of history and nature to continue unfolding into the future.

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CC0001

The Redundancy of Resilience

Daryl Cheong

Calling this barbershop a “shop” pushes it. Cramped between larger units and with a barely-distinct shop front, this ‘shop’ is easily missable for anyone walking past. For every Singaporean who lives, and therefore, walks with gravitas, the small shop is worth no attention. Nor are the ‘smaller’ people within.



Figure 1. The small shop front sandwiched between larger shops.

I became familiar with the twenty-year-old Chinese barber, Zhang. He came earlier this year to work at this shop, hoping to save enough money before returning to China to start his own hairstyling shop. He was hopeful.

The more we talked, however, the more I found out how oppressive his dreams have become. Instead of being hopeful for the life that awaits him, he struggles with the loneliness of being alone. He had been transferred over to this shop from a different

branch following the sudden departure of the previous barber. However, given the manpower shortage, he has not had time for a break. Instead of hope, all he has found here is the transformation from a carefree boy to someone who now worries daily about his finances. In his words, “The rhythm is just so different here. Everything is so fast. Everybody is so fast. It’s so lonely here.”



Figure 2. The calendar showing July, even though it was mid-August

As he talked, I noticed a little calendar by the door that remains in July—a month delayed (it was mid-August), suggesting the last time the previous barber had changed the calendar before her departure. This was the only reminder that she was once here. Each time I step into the shop since then,

I expect to discover, through a new barber, that Zhang had suddenly left too, like his predecessor had. Amidst the unforgiving and uncaring rhythm of Singapore, it's easy for ignored and forgotten dreamers like him to feel like a forgotten face in the crowd, easily replaceable. How then, do migrant workers find the resilience to struggle on?

However, literary critic Parul Sehgal (2015) argues that resilience is empty and should not be upheld as an ideal value for individuals to adopt, positing that the focus on individual values distracts us from larger societal phenomenon that causes the need for such resilience in the first place. Specifically, she cites the example of the opposition towards progressive student protests in American colleges that often accuse these students of lacking grit or resilience in their demands for mechanics such as safe spaces. However, Sehgal (2015) argues that such opposition ignores the racial and societal injustices that catalysed these protests in the first place. Hence, attention must be paid to the societal root causes of issues. Sehgal (2015) demonstrates this point by twisting the metaphor of a phoenix: that though one should rise from the ashes, one should also ask why they had to burn in the first place.

Sehgal's (2015) take on resilience insightfully suggests that resilience is inadequate as an individual value, especially for marginalised groups. Instead, an examination of the societal factors that demand for resilience's need is necessary. After all, psychological resilience, like all human values, is not innate, but is conditioned by social circumstances. Perhaps, then, the question should not be how migrant workers find resilience, but why migrant workers even need resilience. Therefore, in

the case of Zhang, with fairer manpower treatment that permits him to take a break, would he be approaching burnout? With stricter policies and regulations, wouldn't his interests be better protected?

Looking at resilience in a local context, this brings to mind the ill treatment of migrant workers that was finally spotlighted amidst COVID-19. Singaporean sociology professor Laavanya Kathiravelu (2020) lists the many structural issues affecting migrant workers, such as social exclusion, overwork, and inhospitable accommodation. She argues that as members of our society, migrant workers' welfare is critical for Singapore to overcome the pandemic given our "interconnectedness" as locals and migrant workers. Nonetheless, employers, being individuals themselves, are insufficient to guarantee these workers' welfare. Therefore, structural alleviations must be made (Kathiravelu, 2020).

While Kathiravelu's (2020) argument is not explicitly about resilience, she demonstrates that structural changes should be the priority when overcoming societal ills and injustices instead of individual action. Therefore, this affirms the need to question the demand for individual resilience amongst migrant workers in the first place: If these societal ills can be amended structurally, would they need to seek resilience?

Interestingly, Kathiravelu (2020) does mention resilience once, albeit in the context of "building resilience as a nation." Hence, when Sehgal (2015) argues that resilience is inadequate amidst the more-powerful structural changes, Kathiravelu

(2020) furthers her argument by suggesting that what matters should be social resilience instead. When one considers that structural changes achieve precisely that social resilience, Kathiravelu's (2020) argument cohesively proves Sehgal's (2015) hypothesis: individual resilience is inadequate, and social resilience through structural alleviations should be the priority instead.

Indeed, social resilience places emphasis on the role of society in overcoming crises and challenges. Whether this is through structural infrastructure like policies or infrastructural accessibility, or non-tangible values, trust, and social bonds, social resilience turns the attention to societies instead of individuals. While it is true that an individual's resilience can form the foundation of social resilience, individual resilience is often inadequate since (1) individuals can be powerless in the face of large-scale crises, (2) individuals might not have infrastructural or cognitive ability to overcome crises as successfully, and (3) social safety nets would render the need for individual less important. Hence, social resilience can be much more beneficial than individual resilience.



Figure 2. Zhang sharing about his anxieties in the barbershop.

 Yx Tio
Please don't make it compulsory , our Singaporean army boys also ferry this way , no one say not safe .
Like · Reply · 2 w

 Peter Tan
If NS men could use public buses for transportation why cannot these workers?In the past our soldiers had to travel by landrover,3,5 tonners to their destination.Even in the early years of NS just like these workers the army provided free transport to and from work for NS men I remembered lorries with planks placed in rows for them to sit on and when the days turned extra windy their jockey caps could potentially fly off onto the road so far that had not happened to me not sure about others.Later they use 3 tonners at specific pick up points like bus stop each morning to ferry them to camp and back after office hours.Later no such thing as free transportation maybe their allowances are many times increased compare to the old days where recruits were given ninety dollars a month,upon passing out as private another five dollars extra.How to survive?So must provide free transport
Like · Reply · 2 w

Perhaps, as a son of an immigrant mother, Zhang's story moved me incredibly to understand how these migrant workers find the courage and hope to dream and pursue their dreams. Perhaps I was hoping to be inspired amidst my own personal struggles. However, this perspective fails to consider: why should they inspire me? As an individual with significant greater privilege in society, by status and position, such a hope to be inspired by them just seems myopic and ignorant.

Instead, by virtue of my privilege, I should ask why I would expect resilience from individuals in the first place. With adequate safety nets and protection, all individuals would find it easier to survive and ultimately, thrive—without a need for individual resilience. Hence, my initial inquiry might be better rephrased as: Why should individuals be expected to develop resilience? Instead, how can systems create structures to build social resilience to allow individuals adequate tools for survival instead?

This can be illustrated by examining a recent case of workplace negligence: the ferrying of workers on lorries that inevitably led to injuries and deaths. Consider the comments left on a Facebook post updating efforts to combat this issue (Straits Times, 2021):



Allan Tan
Problem lies in the drivers.

Like · Reply · 2 w

 6


 Raymond Kng
 Its the attitude of each driver not the vehicle .. Nowadays drivers are so impatience on the road that causes all this unwanted accident

Like · Reply · 2 w

↳ 2 replies

 15

The first two comments compare migrant workers to national servicemen in both groups being transported by lorries. However, this neglects the fact that military drivers are subjected to strict military driving legislation on top of the prevailing ones by the government. This would result in slower rides for servicemen, therefore ensuring their safety.

The latter two comments pin the blame on the lorry drivers. While it is true that drivers have a part to play in ensuring safe rides, employers and companies with strict timings and instructions put immense pressure on these drivers. This results in drivers being compelled to drive faster than necessary, rendering the rides unsafe.

Hence, in examining this set of comments, it is clear that attention should shift from the individual level to a structural one instead. Instead of false equivalences, we should consider the structural decisions that make military rides safer than migrant workers' rides. Instead of faulting drivers, we should examine the legislation and company policies that fail to protect workers.

In talking about migrant workers, I am conscious of the divide I have created through my diction, "us" and "them." I hope this divide emphasises the different positions and privileges locals and migrant

workers are equipped with. It is this distinction in power that also brings to mind the other divides that exist: between the rich and the poor, the majority and the minority, the haves and the have-nots. Such an examination about the redundancy of individual resilience should apply to other individuals from marginalised communities. It is easy to perceive a privileged individual as resilient for their success and achievements, but when we consider the resources they benefitted from, should resilience be the criteria in question?

When we assess individuals without an understanding of the surrounding circumstances, we lose sight of the factors that affect one's ability to survive or even to thrive within our society. Above all, we lose sight of the need to guarantee the resilience of our society at large, and by extension, for all individuals. However, when we recognise the structural factors affecting another's ability to survive in society, we develop a more empathetic and cohesive understanding for others. With such transformed understanding towards others, kindness would not be a campaign or movement by our government, but an inculcated value in Singaporeans.

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How Unique Are Our Thoughts? Getting Off the Yellow Brick Road

Cheung Chung Long Colman

The ribbon-shaped pasta glistened in crimson sauce under a spread of smoked duck, a sous-vide egg and truffle pate. As bewitching as it was, the Instagram post of Típo Pasta Bar quickly lost its charm after I encountered five similar photos from the same restaurant. They were practically the same dish, although toppings varied. Some adorned with bright green arugula while others snug under a blanket of grated parmesan. Nonetheless, it was the same plate of Malfade with Pink Sauce from Típo.

When I was observing the food blogger community, the strangest thing I noticed was not the sheer number of the Malfade with Pink Sauce posts under Típo's location tag, rather, the absence of negative reviews. I have had it before, and I was not impressed. Of course, taste is subjective. But it puzzled me that a dish so vibrant received critique so bland.

Dressed in an oversized white-shirt, Annette Tong explained to me that Típo was a hotspot for food bloggers. Annette began her food-blogging journey in 2019 and was one of the fastest-growing accounts with 3,000 followers by the end of the year. Her success was attributed to reviewing popular restaurants. "The quality of the photos is important,"

she elaborated. "But the content itself is more important. When I first started out, I would see what other food bloggers were posting and eat the same food as them."

Perhaps, some of them lied and those who did not enjoy it simply kept quiet. But it did make me wonder if a portion of them was swayed subconsciously. I had walked into Típo with no assumptions while they already had a preconceived notion about the restaurant. If trends can influence eating preferences and thus shape the food culture of a community, to what extent does this impact our society on a wider scale? The increased flow of information may result in a convergence of ideas. For example, 'Típo serves one of the best handmade pasta,' even if, objectively speaking, it does not. If so, how much are our ideas about food influenced by others? Even more, how unique are our thoughts?

With the advent of media, our thoughts may not be as unique as we expected. Leonard Berkowitz (1984), social psychologist, explained how the media contributes to anti and prosocial effects psychologically. Known as the priming effect, ideas or events that are reported in the media evoke similar thoughts in the audience. For instance,

violence in movies and news primes similar aggressive thoughts. The psychological experiments by Wyer and Hartwick (1980) and Wyer and Srull (1981) exposed their participants to a series of words—some were aggression-related—before they were instructed to judge a person based on a brief description. Participants who received the more hostile words, and were unaware of the priming words, generally had a more negative impression of the person. This proves that our “automatic and controlled processing... take place passively and involuntarily” (Berkowitz, 1984, p.411). Applied to reality, social scientists reported that the spotlighting of a famous person’s suicide led to the increase in suicide rates.

The media does not tell us what to think, rather, it tells us what to think about. While it is true that we make active and conscious choices of what media to consume, the priming effect explains that the media we are exposed to subconsciously influences our demand. Meanwhile, in order to increase viewership, news agencies spotlight events they think we are interested in. This results in a self-reinforcing cycle of a collective belief. A prime example in our everyday lives is social media ads, which are programmed to present goods and services the algorithm believes we are interested in.

“We can no longer perceive the ideas that are shaping our thoughts, as the fish cannot perceive the sea,” Milan Raj, British writer, argued. Scott Burchill (2012), Senior Lecturer in International Relations of Deakin University, referenced Raj to illustrate how indoctrination occurs. Rather than having direct control over specific thoughts, Burchill (2012) argued that the leading party erects an

invisible wall, abolishing ideas that jeopardises social stability. Free speech continues to prevail, but in a controlled environment where even the most “insurgent” idea is docile to the leading party.

Burchill (2012) substantiated his point with the reformation policies of America’s economy after the Global Financial Crisis. Instead of abolishing the system, which prioritises the upper echelon rather than public interest, policy responses focused on stabilising it. The success of a futile reform was credited towards propaganda. “It was presupposed that the existing system was the best that could be hoped for and permitted policy discussion was confined to proposals which would not inhibit its workings in any meaningful way” (Burchill, 2012).

While the example did not fully reflect Burchill’s (2012) point—as it leaned towards the oppression of ideas rather than obliterating concepts entirely—it brings a strong argument to the table. We are unaware of what we are unaware of. George Orwell’s 1984 novel illustrated the same concept in a more explicit manner. The autocratic party constantly removed words from their national language. Thus, eradicating ideas such as rebellion to prevent an uprising. The proletariat was merely cattle supporting the foundations of the country’s economy. This may be fictitious and exaggerated. But who can claim with certainty that we are not currently living in a predetermined bubble of concepts? And to take it a step further, who is to say that this bubble is not shrinking?

While Berkowitz (1984) blamed us for the self-induced echo chamber and Burchill (2012) accused the government of indoctrination, they agreed that

our consciousness is progressively being undermined. Thought convergence is not new. It is the foundation of civilization after all. However, the process has only sped up exponentially since we entered the digital epoch, as the rapid advancement of technology bestowed unlimited information upon us. A global village should have resulted in a reignless exchange of knowledge among communities, catalysing innovative breakthroughs. But this observation, backed with quantitative support and psychological theories, has only exposed humanity's irreversible path towards a single cataclysmic endpoint.

You are right to argue that we do not have the exact same thoughts (at least for now). However, we, metropolitans, have the same scar of indoctrination. The education system and our parents have brainwashed us that getting good grades, a good job and starting a family is our Yellow Brick Road. Any other paths, even well-lit and welcoming ones, will inevitably lead to our downfalls. This is just an example of Burchill's (2012) aforementioned bubble of government-approved concepts. Hence, the differences in our personas do not matter as our core values are ultimately moulded by the same programme. We are the same characters with different skins. Attempting to pop this bubble is futile. After all, we do not know where the edges of this controlled environment lie. Even if we are capable of doing so, popping it would lead to a calamity as it invites insurgent thoughts to plunder our society. Unfortunately, standardisation is a hallowed by-product of social stability.

As pessimistic as it sounds, Berkowitz (1984) may have published his findings to educate us on making

more informed choices about the information we consume. We may not have the capacity or patience to scrutinise every word we read, but we can take a step back to reassess our thoughts. Do we truly support certain political stands or are we simply shoved onto the bandwagon? Do we actually care about global affairs or are we just misled by widespread media coverage? Do we believe that the handmade pasta at Tipo is heavenly or are we just swayed by others' opinions? It is vital that we spare a moment to evaluate our beliefs and perspectives rather than tread mindlessly on the footprints of others. Perhaps the only way off the Yellow Brick Road is to advance alone.

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CC0001

Writing with Dyslexia

Koh Shao Hong Randall

I have dyslexia, and it has influenced my life in many ways, both positively and negatively. Dyslexia affects everyone differently, but in my case, I have difficulty with writing and spelling. Dyslexia is a common learning difficulty that can cause problems with reading, writing and spelling. Ever since joining university, I realised that most of the time I spend on writing is when I write essays, notes and journals for university classes.

Due to my dyslexia, my handwriting is unintelligible and looks like someone has vomited spaghetti all over the paper. I vividly remember an incident when writing a composition essay when I was in primary school, before I was diagnosed with dyslexia. When my teacher returned essays to the class, she paraded my composition in front of the entire class and berated me for my “atrocious” handwriting. She then bellowed “Why can’t you just put in more effort and write more legibly like Bryan?” Bryan is my twin brother who was in the same class as me (he does not have dyslexia). “Atrocious” was the word that lingered in my head whenever I wrote. I started to wonder why I could not be as neat as my brother? Is something wrong with me? We are twins after all.

Another major challenge of dyslexia in my writing is spelling errors. Most text editors I use have a spellchecker that allows me to easily spot spelling

mistakes I made. Just counting from this essay so far, I can see 5-6 red squiggly lines which indicate spelling errors I have made. Maybe an “a” and “e” got swapped or misspelled “since” with “science.” The spelling errors I routinely make necessitates the need for me to check and recheck my work. The only time when I do not use the computer for my work is when I am doing math or physics as the computer cannot effectively illustrate the intricate diagrams and complex equations needed when doing calculations.

When I was first diagnosed with dyslexia, I was referred to the Dyslexia Association of Singapore Main Literacy Programme to help me with my spelling and handwriting. I will always remember a section in the classroom that showed successful individuals with dyslexia, such as Lee Kwan Yew, Albert Einstein, Walt Disney and many more. These individuals were successful despite dyslexia, which gave me hope that one day I could succeed too. They made me feel that I can succeed not despite but because of my dyslexia. My family and friends have been very supportive and have given me the strength to help me overcome my difficulties with dyslexia. However due to a few sporadic but unpleasant encounters I have had with teachers and classmates, I got to thinking, can the preconceived notion of dyslexia being a disability negatively affect

the opportunities given to people that have dyslexia?

In a 2019 Ted Talk titled “What is dyslexia?”, dyslexia expert Kelli Sandman-Hurley states that the common understanding of dyslexia is inaccurate. Dyslexics mainly have difficulty in the manipulation of languages. This is due to the way people with dyslexia use their brains where the right hemisphere is more active than the left. This difference in language manipulation is the reason why people with dyslexia have difficulties in language perception, but it is also the reason dyslexics have advantages over others. Some of these advantages are discussed in the TED-Ed talk such as the ability to think more holistically and being more artistic. Sandman-Hurley (2019) argues that dyslexia should be seen through the lens of neurodiversity, where the brain structure of any given person is different and dyslexia is a normal part of this variation. Sandman-Hurley (2019) also insists that people with dyslexia can train their brain to use the left hemisphere more thus reading more efficiently

Sandman-Hurley (2019) challenges assumptions about the correlation between literacy skills and overall intelligence. She thinks dyslexia is a part of the spectrum of possible differences in anatomy of the brain. Thus, there is no inherent benefit or downside to having dyslexia as this is just a slight deviation from the normal brain structure. Sandman-Hurley's (2019) view resonates with mine as her views normalize dyslexia and argue that dyslexia can be beneficial in certain contexts instead of being a disadvantage. I also agree that the weaknesses associated with dyslexia can be

overcome as various techniques such as the use of phonetics have helped dyslexics like myself read and spell better.

While some people with dyslexia are supported, others are not so fortunate. In a 2012 review of the research literature on the effects labeling students with disabilities, Patricia Cahape Hammer (2012) discusses the disadvantages of labelling a dyslexic student. Teachers subconsciously give a child lower performance scores when told that they have learning disabilities. In addition, being labeled as ‘special needs’ can significantly affect the self-esteem of students. This is because the term provides little to no explanation on why the child is having academic difficulties. However, despite the obvious disadvantages of labeling students there are advantages with respect to how specific or general the term used to label the student is. A more specific label is better as although students suffering from dyslexia felt stigmatised, some students also felt relieved as there was a legitimate explanation on why they had trouble reading and writing.

It may be a surprise but I feel that applying labels on students with dyslexia is necessary in our education system but is dependent on the circumstances in which it is used. I feel labeling a child as “dyslexic” may benefit the child as it gives them an explanation on the difficulties they are experiencing without compromising their sense of self-worth. It also allows parents and teachers to seek help for the child more easily as there are many options available to help people with dyslexia overcome their difficulties.

From the review by Hammer (2012), it is clear that there is a negative stigma around people having dyslexia but Sandman Hurley's (2019) TED-Ed talk shows that having dyslexia does not necessarily affect your intelligence; instead, it only affects your ability to perceive languages. Back to the original question, having dyslexia and telling others about it affects the opportunities afforded to you. Although, how people with dyslexia are affected may not be obvious or prevalent, it still affects how others view us unknowingly once they know we have dyslexia. This can be combated if more people have a deeper understanding of what dyslexia is and how it affects our brain, the negative perception surrounding dyslexia can be lifted and perhaps the advantages of dyslexia can be emphasised. Would it not be better to focus on the strengths that people with dyslexia have?

I used to think that my dyslexia was a curse as it has caused endless problems for me academically (academically) and personally. The countless spelling mistakes, "atrocious" handwriting and even mixing up my left from my right. However, I now view having dyslexia as a blessing, upon reflection. In this paragraph, I have intentionally left in the spelling errors that I would have made without the help of a spell checker and it goes a long way to show that although (although) people with dyslexia may have difficulties (difficulties) manipulating (manipulating) languages, it does not effect (affect) our ability to understand and convey complex concepts. Having dyslexia has helped me process information in a unique way that others may find difficult. Without a doubt I will always be proud to say, I have dyslexia.

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CC0001

Social Stratification: Why Does It Exist?

Teo Ya Yi Cheryl

Clouds laden with condensation filled the sky akin to a widow, darkened and weeping. A sudden yellow jolt lit up the sky as my shoes pounded heavily on the wet ground. With my lungs strained, I darted across the pavement to seek cover under a shelter. The rain was sudden and relentless with heavy droplets pelting down onto the grey concrete floor. As I stood drying off, a shadow in the distance loomed into my peripheral vision. A deafening roar that reverberated across the sky accompanied by a streak of bright light illuminated the face of the shadowed man: wrinkled and exhausted. With a mysterious box cradled safely in his hands, he trudged along tirelessly as huge droplets of water pelted down onto his skin. At last, he had reached his destination. Carefully, he placed the box into the storage case perched atop his bike. The words "Food Delivery" panned into view as the case was zipped shut. With a rain-soaked shirt and a deep sigh, he mounted his bike and embarked on his next stop. All that remained was the outline of a weary silhouette, fading into the cold unyielding curtain of rain.

As I watched him disappear into the distance, I was reminded that behind every effortless click of the 'Confirm Order' button, there is a rider out there hard at work. In an interview with Brandon Koh who

works as a part-time food delivery rider, he remarks that "To the customers, the job may seem easy as it's just delivering food, but they do not see the challenges that happen behind the scenes, and this is really sad and demoralising." This statement left a particularly profound impression on me as it illuminates the impact that people's perceptions have on the food delivery riders, and sadly, these negative consequences often go unnoticed. Having to brave the weather, long waits, and dangerous driving conditions, plenty must be endured to deliver a packet of food. Yet, oftentimes when they arrive at the door, there's not a single 'thank you'; instead, they are berated on late orders or missing items.

Online news articles further elucidate the abuse of food delivery riders: getting splashed with piping hot soup, people refusing to enter the same lift and even remarks that claim that the job is for those unqualified for the usual 9-5. It seems apparent that food delivery riders are looked down upon in society, but why is that so? They, like many others in Singapore, are working diligently day and night to make ends meet, yet why are they treated with contempt and ostracized by society? Perhaps an elitist social hierarchy has been so deeply embedded in our lives that we choose to follow it strictly and discriminate against those who, in our

opinion, are of a different social class, similar to how food delivery riders are discriminated.

Social stratification has turned into an institutionalised system of social inequality that could potentially lead to greater obstacles to social integration in our multicultural society. Therefore, it is salient to ask ourselves why such social fractures remain among the working class. In modern times, where Singapore is flourishing with a highly educated workforce, why does social stratification still exist, and who exactly are those most affected by it?



Figure 1. Food delivery rider walking in the rain
(Facebook Screengrab taken from 'Complaint Singapore')

Unlike other jobs, being a food delivery rider is flexible and requires no educational requirements. Hence, many may have a generalised view of food delivery as a menial occupation taken up by those with low educational attainment. Since Singapore has now advanced to a society highly focused on education, those who are deemed to be less educated would be discriminated against,

contributing to social stratification. In fact, society has fallen victim to rampant "educationism," a term that describes the existence of an implicit bias that educated people have against those who are less educated (Kuppens, et al., 2018). This idea was further revisited by Hogenboom in her 2017 op-ed published on BBC Future—"Educationism: *The hidden bias we often ignore*." Hogenboom reiterated the words of a 1980s French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, where discrimination in education was described as "racism of intelligence...of the dominant class" (p.6). She highlighted how the dominant class created the education system to justify their societal position, leading to numerous divisions in society, as seen from how higher education grants better income, health, and employment opportunities while the less educated continue to struggle due to the lack of such benefits. Hogenboom (2017) also mentioned a study which revealed that compared to individuals with lower education attainment, those who achieved higher education were generally more well-liked. The prevailing reason for this bias is due to society's notion of educational advancement being within a person's control: if one is highly educated, it means they are intelligent and worked hard to further their studies but if you are less educated, the opposite applies. However, people conveniently forget that low-income individuals are at a disadvantage and may not have the resources available to provide them with higher education.

Despite education being perceived as something beneficial for the growth and development of one's knowledge, there may be certain drawbacks related to hurdles for social integration that people often overlook. Hogenboom (2017) stated that an

overfocus on education “adds a sense of stigma and shame that creates low self-esteem, a pattern that is more likely in societies with meritocratic ideologies, where an individual’s achievement is seen as being based largely upon intelligence and hard-work” (p.13). Meritocracy has become such an ideal social norm that people forget that it is not widely achievable due to inherent contradictions. The development of the talents and abilities that form the very basis of meritocracy are also partly fortuitous, where it depends partially on genetic endowment and financial circumstances. Sadly, many do not recognise this fact and the unconscious social effect of this mentality has led to presumptive conclusions based on education. The less educated are automatically assumed to be incapable and less intelligent despite having many factors beyond an individual’s control that can hinder potential. Consequently, this societal mindset may lead to unequal benefits, where there is a personal bias towards the educated, leading to them having easier access to better job opportunities and higher income compared to the less educated.

The danger of such discrimination is that people could act on their perceptions if left unchecked. Even if there may not be a tangible reason for this, the discrimination of the less educated has become all but formalised and solidified. Even if the stakes are not as high as life and death, the entire course of one’s life becomes determined in this way, and not even from the basis of pure merit. In fact, such a social phenomenon is explained in a 2021 research article by Homburg and Ukrainets—“Saving money or losing face?”. In the article, they relate the cause of social disparities to something

known as “social identity theory.” This theory is based on an understanding that one’s social identity would contribute to the way others view them and by adopting a more socially ideal identity, it would bring about apparent benefits. Therefore, aside from one’s own characteristics such as personal traits, beliefs and values, individuals also define themselves based on the collective characteristics of their social groups. Homburg and Ukrainets (2021) postulate that “people strive for a positive self-image and try to accomplish this by joining more favourable social groups and avoiding association with marginalised groups” (p.910). Additionally, despite being unintentional, the existing divide becomes even more pronounced as the successful adoption of an identity results in their own personal groups (in-groups) being deemed more favourably compared to other social groups they do not belong to (out-groups).

Thus, this discrimination in society originates not from society-at-large but from an internal bias known as “positive distinctiveness” where intergroup discrimination becomes the direct result of an individual’s attempt to strengthen self-worth. The consequence of such social comparison is especially apparent when we label the value of a person based on their occupation, and people whose jobs are deemed less favourable tend to be less respected (Morgan, 2021, p.6). As a result, this could potentially worsen the stigma and shame associated with a particular job and cause alienation of those involved in these occupations. However, the main problem is not cultural differences but the cost of individuality, especially where there is a lot at stake. In other words, regardless of the society we are in, the question of social identity is always

going to be a particular sort of blindness. This may explain why a more educated working class such as Singapore's acquires an instinct for social climbing that becomes a personal goal, despite not necessarily representing one's own values. Like purchasing a luxury product at the expense of supporting a local brand, the engineered divisions and examinations present in the education system to identify and label people have resulted in the setting aside of those who do not have the same means to ensure a better quality of education for themselves. The superficiality of class divisions has emerged despite the progressiveness of today's generally thought-to-be more egalitarian society. Such behaviour further elucidates the severity and impact of people's prioritisation of social identity and self-worth, which is not limited to a person's need to be associated with those from a greater socioeconomic status. Moreover, such prevailing attitudes reinforce differences between various groups in society that increasingly appear not to share the same values.

Putting Hogenboom (2017) and Homburg and Ukrainets' (2021) claims into conversation provides a clearer view of the existing issues in society in relation to the unique class issues of the twentieth century, which is caused by an increasingly more self-centred generation. This situation is further exacerbated by people's prioritisation of social identity, where they would uncritically judge the less educated in an almost essentialist manner and even avoid association with them. The less educated are increasingly deemed to be incapable and less intelligent. This all contributes and reinforces the concept of social stratification as different groups of people are alienated; where their chosen means of

making a living reflects a lack of discernment, which is more on the part of the observer than the observed.

In an ideal utopia, education would help build a better society where individual rights and social responsibility are acknowledged and practised without having to be enforced by law. However, modern education has in fact encouraged in-groups as a motivational strategy that would ultimately benefit the economy rather than for the intention of raising citizens who are necessarily more socially aware. All that remains is a travesty of what education should be. Instead of cultivating individuals with integrity and sensitivity, education has only resulted in the flaunting of itself in the face of those who do not have the same power or entitlement. In this way, the value of education has been vastly misplaced. Unfortunately, a contradiction arises. Despite the undesirable effects that come alongside education, it is also something that we cannot live without. How then can we enjoy the advantages of education without suffering from these unintended harmful social effects? In fact, is such a scenario even achievable? This is a question to ponder over; but for now, we know that by not giving enough attention to the less educated, aside from official schooling, we would be unintentionally promoting the invisible rules of social climbing that affect today's working classes. Therefore, it is crucial we acknowledge the flaws resident in society's perception of the less educated due to an otherwise radically skewed job market that we have normalised.

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CC0001

Social Abidance: Why Do We Do It?

Peck Haijie

The young lady with an apron on at the counter sighed as she took orders of thirsty customers one after another. A variety of drink mixes sprawled across the signboard that hung from the ceiling above her. The same familiar promotional signboard read “Limited time only!”, looking all tattered and nearing the end of its term. Behind her, the revving sound of the drink machine filled the entire store. I, as an avid fan of bubble tea, joined the queue that seemed to reach the other end of our island. Soon, it was my turn to order. “One medium cup of green tea macchiato please,” I told the spiritless shop assistant. She passed me my change, and I left the counter, instinctively heading towards a group of people appearing to be waiting for their drinks.

Just then, three people in their twenties dashed towards the front of the queue, and gathered around their friend who had been in the queue all the while and started placing a bulk order. Almost unanimously, the ones in the queue who had witnessed this event sighed. One man, however, could not stand the sight. Being the one right behind them, he flared up. “Go to the back of the queue, don’t be a nuisance to all of us!”, he yelled with his rage. The group of them quickly became speechless, apologized to him, and scurried out of

his way without completing their order. Needless to say, the previously spiritless young lady at the counter was also jolted awake and she apologised to the man before quickly taking his order.

After witnessing that, I could not help but wonder why did the man get so annoyed by that group of people? Why did the others in the queue sigh? Was it because of the group’s inconsiderate bulk order when there was a lot of people in the queue? Or was it because they did not follow what the others were doing, that is queue up for their turn? The act of queuing has become such second nature to us that we hardly stop to wonder why we do it. Similarly, standing on the left side of the escalator, not talking in the lift when there is a stranger, not sitting on reserved seats, are just some of the many unspoken rules of society, or social norms. These are the many rules that we follow instinctively, being accustomed to the workings of our society. Why do we follow the social norms present in society?

Gross and Vostroknutov (2022) explore psychological reasons behind why people follow social norms. They discuss the idea of norms being internalized through socialization, leading to “norm abidance,” bringing up an example of learning

norms, where children learn from their parents the “rules of moral conduct,” and avoid “norm violations” (Gross & Vostroknutov, 2022). Concepts of social image, where people like others to see them as decent people, and self-image, where we like to see ourselves as moral beings also explain why we tend to abide by norms to avoid a negative portrayal of ourselves.

Through socialization, children are taught from young to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong, and then have their actions rationalized by explaining the implications their actions will have on another person’s feelings and behaviour. For instance, in school, children are taught that it is rude to cut the queue of another schoolmate and are asked to “put themselves in the shoes of the other party.” That is where the sense of guilt hits the child, and children then internalize the consequence of norm violation and bring it into adulthood.

In addition to moral conduct as a motivation for norm abidance, social image is another motivation for norm abidance. Being brought up in a similar social context, most of us will naturally view norm violation as a negative thing, something that would inconvenience others or displease them. Even if something is not morally wrong, like talking in a lift, social image concerns explain that we have an inherent desire to portray a better image of ourselves. Consequently, we tend to just follow what is acceptable to avoid possibly being viewed as a “norm violator” doing something morally unacceptable or like the man said, to avoid being a “nuisance” to others.

Huh et al. (2014) discuss that apart from social conformity being a deliberate process to achieve certain goals, behavioural mimicry or unconscious automatic imitation of others’ behaviours would also lead to the adoption of social defaults.² Their study involved having participants choose between two types of teas, under different deliberate social influence effects by having them observe another person make their choice (Huh et al., 2014). They found that when faced with multiple options, those who had no preference for any tend to go for options that they saw others choose (Huh et al., 2014). Social defaults also “appear to be adopted unless decision makers are certain about their preferences or are able or willing to engage in effortful deliberation before choosing” (Huh et al., 2014, p.758). Additionally, the fact that “most participants were unaware of the presence and influence of the social default on their decisions” further supports the unconscious automatic imitation of others leading to the adaptation of social defaults (Huh et al., 2014, p.758).

Behavioural mimicry explains norm abidance as an unconscious, non-deliberate behaviour. The general idea is that unless an individual has a strong personal preference or opinion about something, by default, they will automatically follow what others do. Simple acts like queuing up for a cup of bubble tea, can be explained as an example of behavioural mimicry. In such an instance, someone who has the intention to purchase a cup of bubble tea, will follow what they see people are doing unconsciously, and mimic that behaviour by walking to the back of the

² A **default** is the choice option that consumers consider first and adopt as the status quo before considering other choice options. **Social defaults** are defaults in social contexts.

queue and naturally joining in. However, in a situation where effortful deliberation about queuing is required, for instance contemplating whether to even get a drink due to a long queue, only then will that person make a conscious deliberate choice to join the queue. That same act of queuing, though seen as an act of norm abidance, is thus not so much deliberate abidance, as it is just mimicry.

Social abidance, when explained as an action based on moral grounds, substantiates much of the way we have lived as individuals within our society, one where people are taught to align meaningfully and consciously to what is socially acceptable and morally right. However, social abidance when explained as a mere unconscious act of mimicry, somehow neutralizes the value or meaning behind our every move, in a way downplays the moral considerations brought forth initially. If some parts of what we consider as morally conscious actions are not so much “morally conscious” as it is just following the crowd, how much of our ethical standards then, are based on the very foundations of moral values?

If what spears our actions is more of what we perceive from others, rather than our own understanding of how our actions will impact the society at large, it would be safe to assume that the lines between the rights and wrongs in society would eventually become blurred and the justifications against the crimes of society eventually weaken. What do we consider as unethical? What should we be doing? Is there really a need to do good? Eventually, the deeper meanings behind how we function as a society loses its essence and the only value left of our actions is

“what everyone else does,” which seems rather superficial and thoughtless. From a practical standpoint, leaving behind the consideration of deeper meanings behind our actions, the peace within a society can still be achieved so long as people are abiding by social norms. Whether the act of following social norms is a result of social influence through moral education and socialization, or a plain instinctive act of mimicry, the side-eyes and disapproving faces on others that accompany any slight deviance from or violation of social norms, could be well-sufficient to deter most from doing so. If what we want is merely social order, then the status quo is more than satisfactory, but if what we are more interested in is ensuring sustainable individual and societal growth, we would need to dive deeper and question much more into our “why.”

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CC0001

A Journey into School Nomenclature

Yang Wei Jie, Nicholas

It is commonly said that getting lost within the vast campus of NTU is a rite of passage for all students, and I was certainly no exception to this. As a freshman unfamiliar with the campus layout, it did not help that most of the academic buildings looked so similar to each other. A white concrete exterior, darkened somewhat due to exposure to the elements, characterised most buildings, and seemed to signal that the buildings were purpose-built without much consideration for the aesthetics. Apart from certain buildings which had the privilege of having more glass panels on their exterior, most seemed devoid of character.

At a glance, I could not easily tell the boundaries between different schools, and I felt as though I was a mouse navigating through a concrete labyrinth. Further complicating this was the fact that, at times, make-shift barriers created out of white netting which demarcated SafeEntry boundaries blocked my path. The few directional signs that were supposed to guide me were now effectively rendered useless. I let out a soft sigh of exasperation as I turned back to chart another route. Admittedly, the hostility of this environment

made me feel somewhat anxious.

Hence, I found myself intently looking out for school names—my sole reliable visual identifier—to gather my bearings. In the process, I noticed that schools adopted a certain nomenclature. Schools either had names which clearly indicated their function and discipline, or they feature an individual's name together with a discipline. After traversing the entirety of the campus, I counted three schools that adopted the latter nomenclature: the Wee Kim Wee³ School of Communication and Information, the Lee Kong Chian⁴ School of Medicine, and the S. Rajaratnam⁵ School of International Studies.

The names of these individuals struck a chord with me. They are prominent, distinguished individuals who are either of historical importance or significance to Singapore, are well-known for their philanthropy, or had made significant contributions to education and/or society. It intrigues me that this nomenclature is not unique to NTU. Rather, it also presents itself in other universities, locally and abroad, and has even permeated some of our pre-university institutions. This prompted me to

³ Wee was the 4th President of Singapore and had also served as a foreign diplomat (Teng & Tien, n.d.).

⁴ Lee set up the Lee Foundation and donated generously to support the establishment of schools (Rahman & Wee, n.d.).

⁵ Rajaratnam undertook many ministerial roles during his time in politics and is widely recognised as one of Singapore's founding leaders (Tien, n.d.).

question: Why do certain educational institutions choose to name themselves or their academic buildings after prominent, distinguished individuals?

Altbach (2005), in his journal article regarding universities and nomenclature, asserts that the practice of naming educational institutions after philanthropists has long-standing historical roots. Some institutions, upon receiving monetary and/or physical contributions, rename themselves after their benefactor. However, Altbach (2005) feels that in recent times, this practice has spiralled out of control, and proposes that the main motivation for this “naming frenzy” stems from the increasing financial burden universities face. Drawing parallels to product branding done by companies, Altbach (2005) observes that the adoption of such a nomenclature is believed to increase the ‘prestige and visibility’ of an institution. He suggests that universities’ higher management are convinced that the public would perceive such named institutions as being of a higher standard, resulting in increased student enrolment and donations.

Altbach (2005) reveals that funding pressures may be a possible reason as to why institutions choose to adopt such a nomenclature, and I concur. However, I feel that Altbach’s (2005) claim that the main motivation for adopting such a nomenclature is for resolving funding needs may not be fully applicable in the Singaporean context. The Singapore government has been heavily subsidising not only universities, but also primary,

secondary and pre-university institutions through various grants. As such, it could be argued that funding pressures are less strongly felt in local educational institutions.

Nevertheless, I realise that the names of the prominent, distinguished individuals used as part of the nomenclature naturally reminds me of their status and contributions, which evokes an image of prestige in my mind. I find this unsurprising, given that such individuals are well-known, influential, and powerful. What is interesting to me, however, is that the image of prestige has altered my perception of the institution, making me view it more favourably. Perhaps, this is due to the prestige of the individual being projected somewhat onto the institution. Hence, I wonder, could the main intent of adopting such a nomenclature in Singapore be for prestige, instead of funding needs?

Tay (2018), in his op-ed discussing the nomenclature of elite and neighbourhood schools, suggests that school names may be sources of “normative privilege.”⁶ According to Tay (2018), a differentiating factor between schools that are deemed as elite and neighbourhood stems from whether their names have an inherent appeal to emotion. The former have names based on sources such as individual legacies or religion, and thus convey prestige by appealing to emotion. In contrast, the latter are mostly named based on their locality, which itself hardly appeals to emotion. Hence, they do not possess much, or even any, normative privilege compared to their elite school

⁶ Normative privilege, in the context of school nomenclature, refers to an advantage that a named ‘elite’ school has over a

‘neighbourhood’ school because of society’s tendency to perceive the former to be more prestigious over the latter.

counterparts; their names reflect the fact that they were merely established to serve their prescribed function.

Citing a study by Ong and Cheung (2016), Tay (2018) believes this disproportionate normative privilege results in two outcomes. Firstly, students and parents perceive elite schools to be prestigious. Secondly, in terms of social status, students of elite schools perceive themselves to be higher than their neighbourhood school counterparts. Noting that there has been insufficient attention placed on how school nomenclature could possibly influence which schools are deemed as elite or neighbourhood, Tay (2018) believes that this could actually cause more differentiation and social stratification in the education system than material inequalities.

Both Altbach (2005) and Tay (2018) hold similar ideas when it comes to how naming an institution after a prominent, distinguished individual could increase the institution's perceived prestige. Where Altbach (2005) merely states that the adoption of such a nomenclature is believed to increase an institution's prestige and visibility, Tay (2018) adds to that idea by proposing a possible reason for the increased prestige which he feels stems from the inherent appeal to emotions. While Altbach (2005) looks at the intent of adopting such a nomenclature from the perspective of universities' higher management, Tay (2018) instead focusses on the effects of adopting a prestige-driven nomenclature from the perspective of primary and secondary

school students and their parents. In doing so, it shows that while school nomenclature could be used as a possible strategy for alleviating financial burdens, it may also come with wider societal implications, particularly in terms of increased differentiation and social stratification as proposed by Tay (2018), as well as the breeding of an elitist mindset.

Considering Altbach (2005) and Tay's (2018) points about nomenclature and prestige, it not only reveals that prestige is a social construct that differs across cultures depending on their societal values and beliefs, but also sheds light on the elitism that is rampant in our education system, and how it may be unintentionally reinforced or encouraged as a result of the adoption of said nomenclature.

In Singapore, Kiasuism seems to drive the need for one to constantly compare and triumph over others.⁷ Hence, considering the impressionability of youths (Gwon & Jeong, 2018) and the large amount of time they spend in school, they may place an inordinate amount of importance on the institutions they attend and associate the perceived prestige and reputation with their sense of identity and self-worth. Such thoughts may be carried into adulthood and used as a criteria to judge others, potentially causing rifts in societal fabric and pose detrimental to social cohesion. The remarks made by Dr. Balakrishnan regarding a fellow parliamentarian Mr. Leong during a parliamentary sitting on September 14, 2021, exemplifies this. By questioning Mr. Leong's admission to a named

⁷ Kiasu is defined, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.), as "a grasping or selfish attitude arising from a fear of missing out on something".

secondary school widely perceived to be prestigious and elite, it highlights how much importance Singaporeans place on institutional prestige. More importantly, it severely undermines the ‘every school, a good school’ narrative that the Education Ministry has been arduously trying to paint.

Returning to the question, why do certain educational institutions choose to name themselves or their academic buildings after prominent, distinguished individuals? There can be a myriad of reasons institutions do so, be it for funding purposes or for prestige. However, rather than proposing a list of possible reasons, there is much more value in elucidating the meaning or significance behind the practice. I believe that the practice itself reflects our collective desire for acceptance and validation in society, which we as humans have a strong desire for. Its manifestation in educational institutions is but a drop in the ocean, as we may also consider the other places such as hospitals where such nomenclature also manifests. When it comes to nomenclature, I believe it will be beneficial for those who have the final say to consider the wider implications that their decision may have before acting on it.

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“Cleaners? Why Should I Care?”

Hiroki James Lee

An aroma of artificial lemon fills the air as a bright yellow “Caution: Wet Floor” sign obstructs the path before me. Stopping to observe the drying corridor, a lone cleaner shifts into focus. Equipped with pink gloves, a worn mop, and a sky-blue uniform, she stands with legs planted, making broad strokes against the floor. Continuing down, she fades into the background as the noise of nearby chatter grows louder. A group of students appears. Attempting to pass the not-so-dry path, they heed the bright yellow sign and inch around it. In passing, the once growing sounds of lively conversation fell to silence, only returning as they gained distance behind me. Within the silence, it was dispiritingly apparent, the group had failed to acknowledge the presence poised in waiting beside them. In their wake, our cleaner returns to view, shuffling back to clean marks left behind. Quoting the sentiment of a cleaner I spoke with, “quiet is best, less complaints, less problems.”

It is now break time, and the cleaners retreat into their resting areas. In a secluded corner of my hall, two cleaners find their solace in a room no larger than two toilet cubicles. Within, the dense atmosphere is palpable, amplifying the feeling of encroaching room walls. This was no designated rest area. A jarring ironing board situated in the middle and the sign “Ironing Room” plastered on the

room’s door made this evident. Yet, neatly rolled exercise mats and shelves filled with belongings created a remarkably personal abode.

Despite donning noticeable articles of clothing, cleaners are typically passed without any acknowledgment. Through society’s neglect of their presence, we essentially render them “invisible.” From the abrupt silence, I learned it was not ignorance feeding this “invisibility.” More alarmingly, the group of students simply possessed no desire to provide the most basic greetings. From a cleaner’s sentiments, I realised how desensitised these “victims” have become towards experiencing emotional neglect. This reveals that a lack of emotional appreciation pervades among cleaners in Singapore. Moreover, the absence of amenities for rest also reflects a lack of physical appreciation. Given cleaning’s physical demands and long hours, one expects there would be proper resting spaces for them. However, we instead find cleaners creating pseudo-rest spaces for themselves. It is telling, how under-appreciated these cleaners are—that even their basic physical needs, such as rest spaces, are not even cared for.

The present duality of the lack of appreciation cleaners experience, both physically and emotionally, begs the question, why is there such a

lack of appreciation for cleaners in Singapore?

In a dialogue hosted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) for their 30th Anniversary Event, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Special Adviser Tommy Koh discussed inequality and “social mobility” in Singapore (Singapore Government, 2018). Within their discussion, it features an examination for the lack of appreciation among professions like cleaners (Singapore Government, 2018). Professor Koh cites the cause for prevalent under-valued cleaners as an increasingly “class-conscious society” (Singapore Government, 2018). He explains that cleaners are taken for granted because the “elite” of Singapore, upper-middle class and above, do not offer the cleaners their due gratitude (Singapore Government, 2018). Conversely, DPM Tharman responds that these actions are not exclusive to the “elite,” but Singapore society as a whole (Singapore Government, 2018). Attributing society’s actions to a deep-seated cultural belief, saying, “We inherited a combination of British institutions and an East Asian culture, both of which are quite hierarchical” (Singapore Government, 2018). He reasons everyday Singaporeans do not appreciate cleaners because they view such jobs as beneath them (Singapore Government, 2018). Here, the reasons behind the lack of appreciation for cleaners is two-fold: socioeconomic class difference and inherited societal beliefs (Singapore Government, 2018).

Both Professor Koh and DPM Tharman offer opinions linking back to greater overarching societal issues (Singapore Government, 2018). While I undeniably concede to the relevance of such issues, I remain nonetheless unnerved. At an

inequality-centric discussion, between prominent figures with leading knowledge of inequality (Singapore Government, 2018), no party is held responsible. How can there be no better solution besides acknowledging the stalemate of larger societal issues? Not discrediting their insights, I argue that such societal issues are not justification enough for the lack of appreciation for cleaners. Through my observations, I noticed how tangible actions such as individuals not acknowledging cleaners contribute to this lack. By simply greeting and thanking them, one shows appreciation for our cleaners. Consequently, if every individual tried showing appreciation for them, this lack should cease to exist. Therefore, I believe, individuals should be held more accountable for the lack of appreciation for cleaners.

In a journal article Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) examine how cleaners’ invisible nature causes them to go unnoticed, arguing the following. Firstly, that invisibility is formed through people’s preconceived notions of cleaning as “dirty work” (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). The physically unclean setting cleaners operate in causes people to steer clear of them. Secondly, invisibility is intrinsic to the cleaners (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). Working early mornings or late nights, cleaners that often work alone go unnoticed in their isolation. Ironically, Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) show us that hardworking cleaners remove any traces of themselves through their thorough cleaning, unintentionally enhancing their invisibility. Furthermore, Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) noted that people would utilise a cleaner’s invisibility to not acknowledge them. They claim that besides generating invisibility, people’s actions also

contribute to maintaining it (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). They bring to light the idea that people are conscious of the veil of invisibility and by offering a basic greeting could break it—yet they do not (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019).

Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) distinctly observe how the actions of individuals contribute toward the invisibility cleaners experience, creating a veil that explains the lack of appreciation. Observing that individuals are aware of this veil, Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) curiously leave unanswered why a lack of motivation to break through the invisibility exists. By layering the insights of the IPS discussion (Singapore Government, 2018) against Rabelo and Mahalingam's (2019) observations, we see that the larger societal issues are perhaps not the main driving force for the prevailing neglect cleaners experience. Instead of irrefutable societal concerns like "hierarchical beliefs" or growing class divides (Singapore Government, 2018), the issue lies somewhere closer to home. Maybe within individualshere is something even deeper holding us back?

Building upon Rabelo and Mahalingam's (2019) unanswered insight, I believe the motivations or lack thereof behind an individual's actions explains the lack of appreciation our cleaners experience. I argue that the lack of motivation to appreciate cleaners exists because individuals within our society suffer from an inability to appreciate others. In Singapore, appreciation has become quite contractual. Where exchanging 'thanks' or appreciation for a task well-done has become commonplace, we rarely observe appreciation reflected as pure "no strings attached" gratitude.

Thus, merit and appreciation become deeply intertwined. For a society built upon deserved merits, it is no coincidence people think appreciation is earned and not freely given. I posit, this then generates an "appreciation void" that grows within all individuals of society. Deprived of unsolicited appreciation, an individual inevitably becomes unable to then express appreciation for others. If such deficiencies for appreciating others exist between individual interactions, then cleaners would undoubtedly suffer. Given how articles suggest increasing workplace appreciation as improvements for workplace productivity (e.g., Westover, 2020; Conlin, 2021), evidently appreciating others is a problem undermining our society. Therefore, cleaners experience a lack of appreciation in Singapore because every individual ultimately suffers from the inability to appreciate others. This inability is a condition that is symptomatic of the lack of unmerited appreciation permeating between every individual of Singapore. In conclusion, the lack of appreciation cleaners experience is essentially a mirror, reflecting back the larger issue within all individuals in our society. The inability to appreciate others or even oneself. Encapsulated by the individual introspection, "Why should I care?" As one debates why they would even consider reconciling this situation we are in, I implore my reader to consider this:

"Seeing is believing." Whether it is the next cleaner you see or any regular Joe, by simply appreciating another, one might just rediscover the true value of unsolicited appreciation. To begin, just appreciate.

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I would also like to thank the cleaners around NTU and throughout the community. Their efforts to upkeep and maintain the clean environments is something we often take for granted. I sincerely wish more people would notice that behind every clean place there is a true hero—the cleaner. Thank you for always doing your best for us.

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CC0001

An Unhealthy Obsession with Health

Audrey Lee Hui Xing

Stepping into the gym as a novice, I would describe it as disorientating. Your senses are completely overwhelmed by the vaguely decipherable pop music blasting from speakers, the occasional grunts of exertion, the cold white lights that illuminate the room, and the faint scent of steel, sweat and cleaning alcohol. All of these signals are then suddenly interrupted by the loud metallic clash of weights that shake the ground that seems to scream that one has superior strength, power and drive than everyone else in the room. Week after week, I dragged myself to the gym, for self-improvement, for habit-building, for not letting my previous week's effort be wasted; all for an attempt to persuade myself that I was in control of my health.

The majority of the people at the gym shared my sentiments, that the gym was an avenue for the benefit of their physical and mental health, where one would go to push ourselves past our comfort zone so that we can continually make progress. Furthermore, to support your progression in the gym, it is expected to perfectly align your diet and nutrition. An ideal diet would fuel a productive workout, and a productive workout would require sufficient nutrients for recovery, generating heavy consequences for our poor choice of food.

I explicitly remember my friend's behaviour at the storage cubicles of the gym right after her intense workout. Her eyebrows were furrowed and her eyes were piercingly examining an innocently packaged energy bar. Her fingers traced every word and every detail for the energy bar; scrutinizing the wrapper, the marketing slogan plastered on the front, the ingredients and the nutrition label. She ultimately decided against eating the energy bar. I naively thought "Perhaps she needed to watch what she ate," and dismissed it, even praising her in my mind for her unwavering commitment to her lifestyle.

Yet, after this very encounter, I noticed her repeating this act of checking. Perhaps it began from curiosity, checking the labels of food to see whether she could quantify the nutritive value for this food, whether it would be aligned with her pursuit of health, whether this food could have any negative setbacks on her progress. Like clockwork, in the supermarket, her hands would habitually search for the ingredients listed, nutrition label, any source of information that would be indicative of the inherent value of the food product. Her overly cautious behaviour was in stark contrast to her carefree attitude before she committed to her fitness journey, eating what she wanted whenever she wanted. Now, she devotes herself wholeheartedly to the pursuit of health. Her

perspective of a healthy lifestyle was so incredibly rigid and quantitative that I thought to myself, surely this cannot be: allowing food to revolve around our life and strictly dictate my decisions based on nutritional information. What defines a healthy lifestyle for an individual? To what extent should we allow nutrient facts to dictate our consumption decisions? Where is the line between commitment and obsession to a healthy lifestyle?

As a practitioner of alternative medicine, medicine that deviated from the norm, Steve Bratman (1997) coined the Greek term “orthorexia” where “ortho” means right while “rexia” means hunger. Orthorexics describes people with an overwhelming fixation with eating what is perceived as the right foods. These unorthodox diets are made popular by celebrity endorsement, usually supported by pseudoscience and promote specific foods as superior while restricting other foods (Bratman, 2017). By consuming glorified foods such as organic foods, it promises a sleuth of health benefits including increased vitality and purity while concurrently demonising other foods such as genetically modified foods for being detrimental and artificial. The unjustified categorisation of food inculcates a binary perspective: acceptable or unacceptable (Bratman, 2017). Moreover, orthorexics often pride themselves on their dedication to their diets, becoming part of their identity, as their immense self-control is seen virtuously (Bratman, 2017). As a result, the mere thought of deviating from dietary restrictions gives them distressing anxiety and fear. They may resort to self-punishment, such as increasing dietary restriction or exercise, to atone for their deviation.

Bratman (1997) depicts orthorexics as followers of a cult of a healthy lifestyle, each with its unique principles and values. If an individual's actions are aligned with the diet, they identify even stronger with the diet, like how one would identify as vegan. Thus, when they deviate, there is a greater sense of betrayal to themselves. Additionally, today's measures of health are clouded with quantifiable data such as carbohydrates, protein, and fat. On the surface, accurately measuring data makes pursuing health effortless, more objective as counting calories and analysing nutritional information becomes a matter of mathematics. But in reality, it reduces one's distinct individual needs to arbitrary values as part of a generalised formula. Modern orthorexics could lull themselves into a false sense of security by placing excessive, unwarranted meaning on these arbitrary limits. This blurs the line between obsession and commitment, becoming obsessive when they allow nutritional value to control their actions, giving power to what they consume, which ironically, consumes them instead.

While Bratman (1997) highlights an obsession with a faultless diet, Foster et al. (2015) emphasise how extreme devotion to exercise can spawn muscle dysmorphia. Muscle dysmorphia, when one has a skewed, unrealistic perception of their body image despite being highly muscular, is a growing trend among but not limited to men due to mass media idealising masculinity in a very specific manner (Foster et al., 2015). Due to this mismatch in perception and reality, individuals think they are inadequately muscular and are often obsessed with increasing their muscle mass and leanness—causing them to be preoccupied with exercise

productivity. This fixation can be manifested in the following ways: training while injured, avoiding social gatherings to maintain an exercise regime or resorting to hazardous performance-enhancing drugs. Training brings immense satisfaction and reward while failure to maximise productivity brings a sense of betrayal and distress: providing motivation for future training sessions, reinforcing a cycle (Foster et al., 2015). In essence, exercise addiction to achieve mass media's ideals can be physically and mentally detrimental as their behaviour becomes all-consuming, ultimately prioritising training and detracting from other prospects of life such as family, friends, or career. An individual with muscle dysmorphia is quoted: "Bodybuilding is my life, so I make sacrifices elsewhere." (Foster et al., 2015).

Foster et al. (2015) highlight how exercise addiction can take a toll on one's physical and mental health as they endanger their body and stress over minute details to achieve their goals. The pursuit for perfection in sculpting their body driven by mass media highlights the fluid, fleeting nature of the ideals of beauty and health. It is ironic that a fleeting and transient perfect body image is contrasted with adopting rigid regimented routines. Society consistently implies that there is no permanent perfect image and to avoid falling into the ironic trap of adopting regimented routines, we should look inwardly and define new notions of health. Rather than blindly conforming to trends, we should develop our new concept of intuitive health that is unique to our body conditions by trying and experimenting with what feels optimal for us.

Both Bratman (1997) and Foster et al. (2015)

highlight aspects of health, although seemingly innocent beneficial pursuits can instigate negative behaviours that affect one's physical and mental health. Bratman (1997) implies that the line between commitment and obsession could be even more blurred as we measure our unique needs with an arbitrary generalised calculator, lulling us into a false sense of security. Similarly, Foster et al. (2015) imply that we should generate our concept of intuitive health and refrain from forcing ourselves into narrow overly-specific and fleeting ideals of health. Together, they both imply that health portrayed in the media is not relatable to everyone and enslaving ourselves to achieving these unrealistic depictions of health, even seemingly objective or virtuous, tends to lead us down a path of long-term mental and physical destruction.

Seeking a healthier lifestyle is not inherently dangerous and will not immediately spur an unhealthy all-consuming obsession. But rather, the lines between commitment and obsession could sometimes be rather blurred and particularly easy to fall down a rabbit hole of obsession, especially with virtuous thinking, media influence and a false sense of security. Moreover, an obsession with physical health may lead to increased anxiety and distress. This shows that physical health and mental health are interconnected and that prime physical condition at the expense of mental health is not healthy.

Lastly, there is no perfect template for health hence requiring one to be open-minded when experimenting with various diets to fulfill our personal needs. The pursuit of health is a complex balancing act of fulfilling physical, mental and

individual needs. It is certainly not easy but ultimately, we owe it to ourselves to reap the rewards of a joyous, healthy and long life.

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CC0001

Self and Home: A Journey Through Its Many Explications

Shervonne Hui



Figure 1. The dining room of my aunt's home

Stepping into the house, I am greeted by my grandmother lounging in her brown reclining chair. Her attention is focused on the television and its flashing images. The terrazzo tiles are cool beneath my feet and the breeze from the balcony is pleasantly refreshing, especially after a day out in the sun. Sounds of traffic, along with the occasional snippet of conversation from our neighbours, filter in through the open windows. A bright lime green sofa sits in the living room with its cushion split open, exposing the cotton fibre beneath. The walls are white, with some areas marked by colourful doodles—masterpieces created by me and my

cousins when we were children. Our living space is decorated with mismatched furniture, each from a different passage of time, as seen in *Figure 1*. Some, like our fridge, are shiny and brand new, while others, like the cupboards, have been reused and repurposed so often that they are barely holding onto their original structure.

This house has been home to three generations of my family, a witness of years of laughter, tears, and anger. Home, it's a curious thing. My living situation has always been a little unusual, but not uncommon. Having been brought up in a single-

parent family, and residing in different households as my mother due to the circumstances, I was quick to realise that this did not mean that I did not belong, but rather, I had more than one place I can call home. To me, home is a place of fond memories, nostalgia, and comfort. Yet, it has its fair share of pain, and it is not always sunshine and rainbows. However, it is still where I am unconditionally welcomed and am able to connect with the people around me. But home, to another person, may be vastly different, comprising of distinct personal experiences unique to him. "Home" is a word everybody is familiar with, but what if we dug deeper than the surface definition? What is home and what does it mean to different individuals?

The article "The Unaccommodated Woman: Home, Homelessness and Identity" published in 1999 by Julia Wardhaugh of University of Wales, Bangor, argues that the notion of home cannot exist without homelessness as they are opposites on the same spectrum. It is implied that the concepts of "home" and "homelessness" stems from convoluted and unpredictable changes in experiences and identities. She suggests that home is the origin of one's social and personal identity, linking people together to this particular place in time, regardless of whether it is in the past or future. Furthermore, Wardhaugh (1999) explored the meaning of home, contrasted it to a house and explained that while a *house* is simply a tangible space, a *home*, on the other hand, is the human interpretation of a lived-in space. However, Wardhaugh (1999) blames the idea of home being a sanctuary, claiming it gives rise to "homeless at home" (p.97) for victims of domestic abuse and for individuals who face discrimination and rejection as a result of not observing traditional

social norms in regards to gender, sexuality, and class.

Wardhaugh (1999) presents a fresh perspective on home in relation to homelessness, signifying that without homelessness, we cannot have the idea of a home, where one finds their identity. However, Wardhaugh (1999) is harsh in her rejection of home as a safe place, arguing that it is not always associated with positive feelings of assurance, comfort, privacy, and a sense of community. Though in certain cases such as domestic abuse, or discrimination due to non-conformity in terms of expressions of gender, sexuality, and class, the place one reside in can be considered a prison, where one might desperately want to escape from. Would such an individual still consider that place "home"? What is home, if not a refuge? If a home cannot be a source of comfort, where would one find his sense of belonging in society and how would he, then, have a sense of identity?

In relation to this topic, at a TEDxCoventGardenWomen event hosted by TedTalks in 2016, Najwa Zebian, a Lebanese-Canadian activist, poet, educator based in London and Ontario, spoke about finding home through poetry. With Wardhaugh (1999) emphasising on home as more of a tangible living space, Zebian (2016) offers a contrasting yet riveting argument of the intangibility of home as a concept. Drawing insights from her personal experiences, Zebian (2016) reasons that home does not have to be a place, nor does it have to be with another person, but rather, to "embrace the home that is already within us" (2016, 13:53). According to Zebian (2016), people often make the grave mistake of building

homes in other people, dedicating too much time and effort to others such that they set themselves up for disappointment when these people inevitably walk away. Elaborating on her childhood, she explains that due to her family's situation, constant travelling and the shifting of residences were common. As a result, she shared that she felt lost and lonely, as though there was not one place she belonged and nowhere to call home. Furthermore, Zebian (2016) implies that "home" can be with a person or an object, as she found hers in writing and with her journal. She claims it is where she can be genuine with her thoughts and feelings without judgment from others, and where she felt the most welcome.

Zebian (2016) provides an interesting point of view, suggesting that home does not have to be a physical living space, but rather, it can be with a person, or with oneself. She brings in the argument that there can be many facets to "home" as a concept, and it is mainly built upon feeling at ease with oneself and being comfortable with one's place in the world despite the challenges faced due to a mix of cultures and backgrounds. If "home" is defined as having a place in the world, it is reasonable to believe that as long as one is at peace with himself, he will have a sense of comfortability no matter where he might physically be. However, Zebian's (2016) argument is based on her own unique experience, and thus, home may be perceived differently by others.

Gaining insights from both perspectives, it appears that regardless of family background, home is something that deeply resonates with people. Though each of our home experiences is unique, the experience of finding or having a home is

universal. Just as Wardhaugh (1999) stated, "home is an expression of lived space, of human meaning and being-in-the-world" (p.95), it is human nature for people to seek comfort, finding familiarity in objects, places, or people. As such, home becomes a source of one's identity, as it impacts how one will be able to feel comfortable with himself and the environment he is in, be it a physical place, like a house (Wardhaugh, 1999), or something intangible, like a person, or oneself (Zebian, 2016). Defining what makes for a "home" is complex and multi-dimensional. Based and built on personal experiences, what home is to one person may not be the same for another. Since the definition of home is man-made, it is almost an inexplicable concept that is mostly understood through feelings felt towards a particular place or person.

As implied by Zebian (2016), home is often associated with positive feelings, where one may be able to find a sense of belonging and confidence within himself, without it having to be a tangible place. Positive feelings towards a place, person, or object are strongly linked to one's memories, and contributes largely to how one may be able to say he feels at "home". I am grateful to think of home as a positive experience, because others may not be as lucky, especially for those who are what society deem to be "homeless" and those of "broken homes". While they may not have a good association with their living spaces due to personal experiences, they may still be able to find comfort in other things, which, in a sense, is a step further into their search of a place to call "home" eventually.

Though the general perception of "home" is largely related with our living space with our family, what

home is for people is very much an intersection of their personal experiences, memories, and identity as these factors are inherently tied to who they are as a person. It is only through their unique experiences in life that will define what home means to them personally.

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CC0001

“Hidden Workspaces”

Farrah Adystyaning Dewanti



Figure 1. Corridor leading to offices in the College of Science building

A chair, a table, a partition screen. Everything that laid on the ground had been deliberately improvised to accommodate a single user. Above this neat rustic nest you could liken to an office space was the bright gleam of white LED bulbs that shone onto heaps of *Khong Guan* biscuits and outdated newspapers, comfortably placed on a makeshift styrofoam desk (Figure 1). All the other supplies were in arm's reach of this methodic, monochrome clutter. The air smelled faintly of ethanol and lemon-scented air freshener that had failed to diffuse through any ventilation systems.

A temporary wall of privacy to the abode had been built with the help of a mere cleaning cart and its



Figure 2. Cleaning cart at the entrance

brooms for window blinds, strategically placed at the entrance of a narrow hall (Figure 2). It stretched to approximately five meters in length, and 1.5 meters in width, just enough for one to squeeze through. This strange arrangement, however undisturbed, was not unoccupied. Its reclusive user rarely made eye contact with anyone walking past his enshrouded space. Through the cart, you could see his grey hair peek through and his aged, blood-flecked eyes fatigued from his morning rounds, as he occasionally took a sip of his placid *kopi*. This personalised world was free of distress and tension, a place of refuge for the man who appeared tired and world-weary. His wrinkled hands trembled as he repositioned his cart to prepare for another

round of routine tasks.

A wider corridor connected this space to formal workspaces barricaded behind locked doors and governed by strict deadlines. These spaces were in slight disarray as LED screens occupied tiny desks, along with folders of the latest academic journals and racks of coffee capsules. Tables were forcibly squeezed together by its tenants in an effort to foster a culture of cooperation and synergy.

Though technically architecturally connected, the conjoined but inconsequential corridor quickly became a failed attempt at connecting the two opposing worlds. In that liminality, many found themselves rather intrigued by the other side as most would spare a glance or two before quickly retreating to their own corner. Indeed, it was a strange arrangement I could not fathom, especially after I had borne witness to the alliance of the two users. We rely on esteemed scientific ideas and the indispensable daily cleaning rounds to keep the space reputable and usable, yet the sight of hidden spaces is not uncommon. In my recent wanderings, I only started to take notice of the places that bore semblance to such arrangements, and I started to ask myself, "Why do cleaners often appear invisible to the public?" More importantly, is there a curated effort to purposefully hide them?

As Rabelo & Mahalingam (2019) discuss, the spatial demarcation of many workplaces is engineered to uphold social hierarchy, in which building cleaners have become subject to subordination. For example, organisational administration can normalise this separation by creating a 1) temporal divide, by assigning workers to work alone and

overnight or 2) a spatial divide, by separating their workspaces or excluding them from certain spaces in the building. Both factors then feed into the notion of peripheral existence and invisibility in a working environment, which is a common phenomenon often faced by workers in low-status and stigmatised professions. Such is the case for building cleaners, a ubiquitous presence in our daily lives that we rarely acknowledge. When questioned on how invisibility affects them, cleaners often described the experience as shameful and dehumanising but acknowledged that they had to resign to this invisibility as it is merely a feature of the job. In addition, a disempowering message is also sent out—that low-status workers are not worthy of social interaction and appreciation. Thus, there is some sort of curation by the authority to hide these workers.

Hatton (2017) fervently purports that this invisibility is certain and characteristic of cleaning work. He mentions that the invisibility phenomenon is not only borne from socio-spatial segregation, but is in fact an intersection between cultural, legal, and spatial sociological mechanisms. Socio-cultural perceptions are enacted on workers' bodies or on their skills to economically devalue their work. For example, emotional labour is exploited when cleaners are expected to serve with a smile despite having just cleaned up irresponsible clutter and dirt left behind by the public. Workers often must negotiate tensions in their emotional wellbeing to comply to organisational expectations. The reduced acknowledgment of this expected emotional sacrifice devalues their work economically, thus rendering cleaners invisible. In addition, the socio-spatial dynamics are ostensibly designed to devalue

their labour and authority. The lack of a proper workspace only enforces the invisibility phenomenon. Hence, cleaners often appear invisible to the public due sociological mechanisms that often devalue certain types of labour culturally, legally as well as spatially.

While the two journals agree that invisibility is indeed characteristic of cleaning work, they disagree on the factors that result in this phenomenon. Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019) argue that invisibility is a byproduct of spatial segregation, which is curated to maintain power dynamics in the broader society, as we have very much seen from my observation. Hatton (2017) adds on that invisibility is not only a consequence of socio-spatial separation but also other sociological mechanisms—cultural and legal, used to devalue labour. Again, these mechanisms are designed to devalue labour which then creates the invisibility phenomenon. However, I suppose the cloak of invisibility that comes with this separation is nuanced; its existence could bring some sort of comfort to the cleaners themselves. For instance, visibility can be used for extreme control in micromanagement practices. When we think back to the sight of improvised clutter, we can assume that it was created without official approval. Cleaners are given this opportunity to curate their own space in the building and relax, essentially turning this niche into their advantage. Having said so, the real fact of the matter is that such separation and invisibility may have lasting effects on psychological perceptions on the job and its people.

In answering my question of how invisibility is created, I find that Hatton (2017) and Rabelo and

Mahalingam (2019) complement each other. To add on, I believe that our own biases can effectively blind us from things we deem as unpleasant such as dirt and that the engineered separation of space only enforces this. Yet, more can be done by us to observe their existence, and to prevent this invisibility screen. For example, a simple “hello” or “thank you” can have a large effect on the way we view them. Suffice to say, we can only surmise ways in which we can do more as individuals to help and empower our essential workers but we can always start by unlearning our prejudices against marginalized communities and actively acknowledging their existence beyond just their purpose in our society.

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CC0001

The Significance of the Modern Art Gallery

Yeo Chan Hoang Lance

I recently visited the National Gallery for an exhibition. I had always enjoyed its architectural design, the intricate sculptural reliefs and Corinthian columns a stark contrast to the blocky, modern buildings surrounding it. Inside, sunlight filters in from the skylight above, casting soft shadows over the walls and floors below. Polished wooden floors and glass railings occupy the same space as the concrete balusters and shuttered windows, a seamless fusion of Greek and Roman architecture with modern simplicity.

However, the design of its gallery spaces is unlike its exterior design. The design of a modern gallery space is purposefully plain, their walls acting as a blank canvas on which the art hangs upon, free from distractions. Like a lab environment, art is viewed in a vacuum, separate from the influence of the outside world. They are constructed around principles which O'Doherty (1986) suggests are necessary rather than optional: "The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light...The art is free, as the saying used to go, 'to take on its own life.'" (p.15) This style of gallery is also referred to as the White Cube aesthetic. This raises the question: If gallery spaces are simply sterile white walls, what role does it play in a museum-goer's experience?

In *Civilizing Rituals*, Duncan (1995) notes that art museums often borrowed design elements from ritualistic sites such as religious buildings or palaces. The surprising reason for their similarity, Duncan (1995) argues, is that both are spaces in which one conducts rituals. These rituals do not refer to traditional religious rituals, but rather the interactions a museum-goer has with the museum's spaces. Similar to how religious followers embark on pilgrimages, a museum-goer moves through a museum's galleries and spaces, artwork to artwork. The contemplation of art mirrors that of religious prayer and meditation. Duncan (1995) claims the museum ritual is a transformative and restorative experience. In fact, she observes how museums are designed to enable visitors to view all the exhibits as a performance or a ritual.

Being a former court, the National Gallery commands respect and silence, drawing out a state of mind suitable for the consumption of art, ensuring museum-goers are completely immersed in a specifically curated experience. Its gallery layout has also been designed such that one is able to explore them entirely without the need to backtrack. By allowing visitors to effortlessly go from gallery to gallery, the ordering of the exhibits maintains the ritualistic trance as described by

Duncan (1995): “a state of withdrawal from the day-to-day world” (p.14). This, combined with how art galleries create the illusion of being shut off from the external world, makes the gallery a space where one is disconnected from physical time and space. As gallery design evolved, art has become increasingly isolated to remove any outside influence on the work of art. In particular, Duncan (1995) argues that “the fewer the objects and the emptier the surrounding walls—the more sacralised the museum space” (p.17). For this reason, artworks displayed within attain a timeless, sacred quality. A museum’s architecture and gallery design promote contemplation and intimacy between viewer and artwork, which is central to the museum experience.

Art can have a profound impact on the space surrounding it. A physical space can be influenced by an artwork, just as an artwork can be influenced by the space it occupies. *Horizon Field Singapore* by Antony Gormley (Figure 1) commissioned by Singapore’s National Gallery for the Ng Teng Fong Roof Garden, demonstrates this fact. Gormley invites the viewer to step within the space of the work, navigating through an intricate web of aluminium hoops. The work becomes part of the space around it and distinctions between the artwork and its surrounding environment break down. The space in which the work resides in, and even the viewer’s body interacting with it, can be considered part of the aesthetic impact of the work.



Figure 1. *Horizon Field Singapore* (2021), Antony Gormley

This concept, and how it relates to the art gallery space, is further explored in the essay “Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space,” O’Doherty and McEvilley (1986) state that galleries were constructed according to strict rules previously mentioned and exist not just as storage space, but as the very basis of how each work of art may be viewed as a consequence of the limits of time and space. O’Doherty and McEvilley (1986) observe how gallery design has progressed from the Paris Salon (Figure 2), where the goal was to fill the wall with paintings, to the sparse design present today. Previously, artworks were viewed as being contained within the frame of the painting. As artists explored with new ideas, the boundaries of an artwork began to blur; and O’Doherty and McEvilley (1986) note that an artwork’s influence spilled onto the wall it was hung upon. The result is that: “The wall, the context of the art, had become rich in a content it subtly donated to the art.” (p.29) The gallery space cannot be considered neutral, as it is the context for the artworks, and is part of the artwork’s content. Duncan (1995) suggests that these meanings are necessary and foundational to

the museum space. The exploration of its spaces seeks the identity of art in its essence. In this way, O'Doherty and McEvilley (1986) share with Duncan (1995) the necessity of contemplation in relation to the qualities that gallery spaces possess. They each demonstrate how museum space is deliberately woven into the context of the artwork. Moreover, Duncan (1995) also emphasises that the effect of such spaces is wholly unique to the museum experience.



Figure 2. *The Exhibition at the Salon du Louvre in 1787* (1787), Pietro Antonio Martini

Both O'Doherty and McEvilley (1986) and Duncan (1995) note how the development of art, where the focus shifted away from representation to pure aesthetic meaning, has caused a change in gallery design. Museum curators started to isolate artworks from each other, such that only one appears in your field of vision. This is so that the work is free from the influence of objects around it, and museum-goers appreciate that the integrity of each piece depends on its individuality. With regards to hanged pictures, O'Doherty and McEvilley (1986) build upon this idea and argues that the boundaries of each painting must thus extend past the picture plane to the wall. The gallery walls are as much part of the artwork as the work itself.

There is no clearer evidence for this than Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. As O'Doherty and McEvilley (1986) and Duncan (1995) argue, artworks in an art gallery space are imbued with a timeless, sacred quality. Ordinary objects are no exception, renewing the purpose of an art gallery space as the birthplace of art. Duchamp takes advantage of this fact. By displaying the urinal in a gallery, its status is elevated to that of an art object. Without the art gallery space, *Fountain* would simply have been just another urinal.

However, not all artworks are meant to exist in an art gallery. Take the previously mentioned *Horizon Field Singapore* for example. As a site-specific work, it was created with the environment surrounding it in mind. If we were to place this work in an art gallery, it would deviate from the original experience the artist intended for it – both because of its materials and design. By doing so, the work of art may be deemed as ineffective due to a transference of context from its actual setting to the more abstract one of a white cube gallery space. In this case, the external context surrounding the artwork is irreplaceable.

Alternatively, the works of anonymous British street artist Banksy, appear to prove the opposite. Due to his popularity, Banksy's works would undergo a complete removal of its original context. The entire wall painted on would be sold to the highest bidder, leaving a literal gaping hole. However, would the artwork's message be as authentic as a result? In relation to the curation of artwork, the meaning of a work of art is not as clear as we may think, despite the recognition of the importance of context in the two different examples given. Whether employing a more abstract context

of a white cube gallery space, or its original setting, the meaning of a work of art is always adapting according to context, often in unexpected ways, as the nature of art demands.

The National Gallery, not unlike many museums around the world, can be considered a piece of art itself. Its design prepares the minds of museum-goers to partake in the rituals described by Duncan (1995). The way we think of art affects the way we display it. As evidenced by the art gallery of the past, the Paris Salon, there has been a shift in how we view art, from art as object to art as a conceptual idea. The gallery space, along with the work of art itself, has become a medium in which ideas about modern art are conveyed. As proposed by communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, "the medium is the message." To properly convey its ideas, a work of art needs to consider the kind of space it exists in. The elusiveness of modern art interpretation only emphasises this.

Acknowledgement

I would like to extend my gratitude and thanks to my tutor, Dr. Chia Weiting Joanne, for her continuous guidance throughout the course. I think art and the discussions surrounding it is always a challenging topic as many concepts are hard to understand. When I was writing this, there are many instances where I felt stuck, and I think Dr. Chia really pushed me to think deeper and find new areas and concepts to explore. This paper would not have been possible without her constant advice and encouragement.

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CC0001

The Conundrum of Public Art

Angel Sarah Mathew



Figure 1. Doodle Deck, Imaginarium, Singapore as viewed from Google Arts & Culture

In the eyes of an outsider looking in, the walls are unsightly. Cramped in crevices every which way of the daffodil-yellow walls are muddled multi-coloured pencil scribbles, likening to graffiti. Hues clash in contradiction, squiggles overlap. There is no purpose, no rhyme or reason, no cohesion to the scrawled pigment over textured drywall.

Public vandalism? No, lined up near the edges of the walls are miniature neon-green tables and chairs, stocked full of colour pencil supplies in a purposeful, beckoning invite to the young visitors to add on to the collective art piece themselves. This is none other than the Doodle Deck instalment in Imaginarium, Singapore Art Museum (Figure 1). An instalment by the young community, for the young

community, upon looking closer, the charm of the previously uncared for doodles is reborn with a new face.

Now, the walls are painted in splashes of pencil doodles reminiscent of childhood innocence. In the form of caricatured birds, flowers, and faces, bright orange, passionate red, and solemn blue, the walls are painted in the whims of kids with the liberty of conveying their personality through a tangible medium, free from the burden of creating for the sake of something visually pleasing. The walls are regarded as representations of creative expression, rather than artistic perfection.

Yet you too can likely recall memories of being

chastised as a kid for scrawling on the walls and making them ugly. And so, this hands-on exhibition leaves many things to ponder over. I consider the intention of the way children doodle, in contrast to adulthood perfection of artistic space. Unquestionably, as we grow older something transitions in the way we perceive “good art.”

Taking a step back, I encourage you to question whether we would still feel this fondness for the piece if it had been a work of graffiti on the side of a road. In an objective vacuum without context, free from the bias regarding our perceptions of the artists, consider whether you and many others would find this subject visually displeasing, tacky. Would we consider the doodles art? Good art, at that? Would we, as a community, want it in public space?

There seems to be a fine line between art that is desirable, and art that is not. I've observed that the way we perceive art, such as children's art or art in a public space, largely depends on what we assume about the artist. The question follows then, should the community perception of public art matter?

Take a universally recognised and just as controversial form of public art, that of graffiti, as an example. In discussing the public perception of graffiti and the premise that it introduces an “intolerable level of disorder,” Kurt Iveson (2009) asserts in his paper, “War is over (if you want it): Rethinking the graffiti problem,” that “these perceptions are socially constructed, and are open to being socially deconstructed” (p.27). Iveson (2009) goes on to explain that over time we may even come to view graffiti as “a symbol of vibrancy and

energy rather than danger and crime” (p.27).

What does this suggest? If our conceptions of ‘good’ art, value, and overall aesthetic judgement are manipulated by the socio-cultural environment we have been raised in, and the familiar conceptions that come with certain modes of art, then it can be inferred that the public are by no means as qualified or worthy of the agency to determine good public art as city advisors and personnel in charge. This stands on the reasoning that standards of good art need to be consistent, or at least be found on criteria that do not vacillate. Public art ought then to be assembled because of aims other than public approval. Furthermore, it is also highly possible that the general public may confuse overall artistic value with judgements of technical quality. In fact, it may be those judgements that create the notion that abstract art, or in the case of the Doodle Deck, children's art is not unanimously valued as “good.” On the other hand, an art connoisseur would be able to quantify exactly what makes the abstract “good” that others may miss.

These effects of our community landscape on our perceptions can be aptly summarised in what scientists have dubbed the “mere exposure effect” (Meskin et al., 2013). This psychological phenomenon describes that the public tends to develop a preference for things that are more familiar. In a research article titled “Mere Exposure to Bad Art” (2013), Meskin et al. explored this concept further in the contexts of fine art. The works of two painters, Kinkade and Millais, were treated as the standard for “bad” and “good” art respectively, based on the judgment of art critics, and recognition of prodigy quality by art historians. Student

participants were shown a sequence of images of these paintings mid-lecture throughout the term. In the end, they were shown all 60 images, and asked to express a degree of “liking” for each of them. Surprisingly, Meskin et. al. (2013) revealed that, in line with the art critics, those who were exposed to Kinkade paintings had overall lower “liking” scores for his work compared to the control group. In contrast, those who were frequently exposed to Millais’ works on average gave higher scores compared to the control.

What this experiment revealed regarding perceptions of public art is that while influence by mere exposure, and subsequently the concept of them being socially constructed, cannot be denied, results lead them to believe that something more goes into the formation of art judgements—“perhaps that (...) is artistic value” (Meskin et. al, 2013, p.159).

Could Meskin et. al.’s (2013) view be completely objective? Not likely, as in designing the experiment, they too play into these same pre-emptive socially constructed conceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ due to art recognition and judgement by other authors. Therefore, even further does the idea come into play that socially-constructed contexts of perceptions and inherent judgements of quality are difficult to separate. Iveson (2009) adds to this sentiment in his criticism of the current approach to street art (graffiti), where “the only difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ graffiti is the difference between ‘authorised’ and ‘unauthorised’ graffiti (...) regardless of their artistic merit or content” (p.28).

So, what is the solution then?

In this conversation of whether art is created for the artist or the audience, it is acknowledged that even in calling it “public art,” the public is rarely accredited, if ever, as a key decision-maker in its assembly. Furthermore, public art is often what the authorities believe the masses should consume, rather than what they want to produce. Yet consider that the Doodle Deck was created by many members of the community, street graffiti from a member of the community, and artworks for the mere exposure effect experiment being created completely distinctly from its participants. The strongest bonds to the public art in question were created when there was familiarity with its creators. Easily enough explained, the point of public art is that it helps people form a sense that their environment is unique, that there is something special about it. Greater involvement in the way public art is developed is one particularly effective method to add value to its perception.

Ultimately, it seems almost impossible to certainly differentiate between “good” and “bad” art, and extremely difficult to separate oneself from pre-conceived notions about the art and artist. The results of the Meskin et al.’s (2013) experiment intriguingly indicate that it is true that familiarity and cultural exposure increases perceived value, so the public is entitled to only partial credit in their innate ability to recognise valuable art. However, this exact aspect of bias can be utilised to an advantage, where greater involvement in production corresponds to an increase in satisfaction with the results. This can be achieved by allowing the public to have freer reins of design influence over the installations in their community, and opening spaces for greater liberty in public art expression.

Remember, unlike the media one privately consumes, art in a public space does not capture the essence of free choice of consumption. We also have to consider that as it is their space that public art occupies, the community rightfully should be a key decision-maker, while acknowledging that their judgement is not impartial and can be manipulated.

To that end, community perception of public art is not always credible, but it should matter. And if it matters, to keep lobbying for public art that the community actually wants matters more than ever.

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CC0001

Tattoos and Trust

Sravani Somisetty

"Um, can I breathe?"

A slight chuckle escapes her. "Of course you can. 8 counts in, 8 counts out." His bare chest rises and falls haltingly under her gloved hands as they resume to add deliberate strokes of ink into the side of his chest. I break my gaze away from my friend's tattoo machine and quickly scan the studio, suddenly aware of the number of disrobed people, their skin exposed under the abundant light.

The large shophouse windows of the tattoo studio make for a well-lit interior by day. Even by night, between the parallel rows of ceiling lights and the several angled ring lights scattered around, not as much as a single shadow is cast in any nook or cranny. There is no place to obscure possible bodily insecurities from sight, no way to mask the piercing pain. Simply put, there is nowhere to hide.

So, they don't. The clients place their just-shaven skin under the hands of their tattoo artist, or to be more precise, their buzzing tattoo needles. Every jab punctures their skin to inject the ink underneath, making it an inseparable part of them. Methodically going along the stencil of the tattoo—the one that their clients deeply identify with—the artists are front-row privy to their clients' inner world permanently materialising onto their skin. I bear witness to trust, supposedly given so sparingly,

being handed to the tattoo artists on silver platters.

The brazen openness sent my brain to overdrive as it desperately tried to reconcile what my eyes could not deny with what I have always believed. In nearly all my social interactions, before words leave my lips or my thumb hits send, there is a delay permeated with the "think twice" procedure. Skipping this step is non-negotiable, for over-sharing to the wrong crowd is a harbinger for unwelcome judgement and scrutiny. This waver only ceases to exist in the presence of a pocketful of trusted loved ones. Even then, this spontaneity dispels gradually, until the accumulation of trust is sufficient. It had taken endless 2 am talks, countless quarrels, and going through thick and thin before I could entrust them with my most private feelings and internal battles without hesitation.

So I could not even begin to fathom being at the receiving end of such trust, something so markedly safeguarded, from essentially a stranger. It feels bizarre to skip the entire evolution of a relationship, transitioning from acquaintances to friends and eventually confidantes. What is it about the experience of getting a tattoo that accelerates the process of trust between strangers?

Hard-pressed for an answer, I ventured into the

depths of Google, the rapid trusting phenomenon that I had beheld at the forefront of my mind. Before long, I chanced upon a paper by Olav Kjellevold Olsen (1996), which seems to encapsulate the phenomenon in a singular term: "swift trust." Basing his understanding on the insight of Meyerson et al. (1996, p.170), Olsen (2018) states that swift trust emerges in perilous circumstances, when one takes a plunge to trust before time can reveal whether the recipient is indeed worthy of it. Trust of this nature often emerges in response to situations where the lack of collaboration could put everyone in jeopardy. The instantaneous rapport that ensues aids those present to not only cooperate with each other and take risks, but also bank on one another within a narrow time window, despite having neither shared experiences nor exchanged vulnerability.

Although being thrown into life-threatening situations is not a common occurrence, Olsen's (2018) argument does amplify a key feature of accelerated trust. All things considered, a higher objective achieved by swift trusting outweighs the potential risks of doing so. From the possibility of shaky line work to getting an infection, there is a definite, palpable danger associated with tattooing. The resultant fear, however, is eclipsed by the desire of getting a tattoo, making a tattoo parlour fertile ground for swift trust. Clients eager to get a tattoo ditch their potential inhibitions and are compelled to develop swift trust in their tattoo artists.

When ensnared in a high-risk situation, one is likely to glean any sort of information available to base their immediate trust decisions on, which leads to

them making on-the-spot impressions. More than anything else, they do this as we tend to fall back on our basic instincts when in unfamiliar scenarios, and we make first impressions borderline constantly in our daily lives.

An "All in the Mind" podcast episode dissects this specific process of constructing first impressions, coupled with an assessment on how one's past experiences causes one to make certain trust associations (Smith, 2020). Some pavlovian conditioning seems to be involved—when a stranger has similar features to those we trust, we are more likely to trust the stranger too (Smith, 2020). This was attributed to how humans make up associations very intuitively, even if it is based on inconsequential premises such as facial traits (Smith, 2020).

Getting tattooed by someone is far from a split-second decision as comprehensive research is usually done prior, unless one's inebriated self was getting a "tramp stamp." Since people also agree to get tattooed by tattoo artists before meeting them, so the decision is certainly not made based on their faces either. It is, however, considerably contingent on the tattoo artist's previous designs. More often than not, tattoo artists sketch these designs by drawing from a well of inspiration, personality and values deep within them. If one feels like the tattoo art mirrors a part of themselves, they are likely to view the tattoo artist as someone familiar and thus will associate trustworthiness to them. In fact, this connection is arguably more genuine, since their designs are a truer epitome of themselves than their exterior appearance. The reason why the resonance between an inspired piece of work—a

story, a melody, or even a tattoo design—and its audience is so valuable is the inexplicable warmth of being represented and understood. Therein lies the power of universal feelings like love and heartbreak—every single person knows how it feels, bonding people together. Thus, sharing an intimate semblance is a powerful magnet for trust, as derived from Smith's argument, enough to trust a stranger to etch a tattoo into one's skin.

Whether in a scenario as rare as being in danger of losing your life or as common as creating first impressions, both Olsen (2018) and Smith (2020) demonstrate that we can find the means to trust a stranger, subconsciously equipping ourselves with information to justify their trustworthiness. However, such information is scant and undependable in both scenarios due to such a brief timeframe, thus will never be adequate in silos to buttress the fact that our trust in the stranger is not misplaced. One finds themselves in precarious situations or surrounded by strangers by circumstance, and on a tattoo parlour bed by choice, but the parallel of giving trust despite the insufficient rhyme or reason is unmistakable.

Since not much can be derived from external factors, internal factors seem to be far more pertinent in speeding up the typical timeline of trust. One's willingness to trust a stranger says more about themselves than the stranger—their need for survival in the face of imminent danger, or their need for the solace of familiarity in an unfamiliar crowd. Similarly, their desire to get a tattoo trumps their fears associated with it, which bestows them with an enhanced capacity to trust. Oftentimes tattoos are capsules brimming with personal

significance. Whether they embody a life passion, betoken a crucial phase in life, or pay homage to a loved one, they possess a certain gravity. Expressing such strong sentiments, ones that make up the essence of who they are, is a cathartic experience—it allows you to distinguish yourself from others, feel special about your uniqueness, and even reconnect with yourself. Tattooing happens to be a powerful form of cathartic release, and yearning for this catharsis creates a fervour of getting a tattoo so great that it transcends any considerable risks involved. It allows one to surmise that their tattoo artists are trustworthy, expediting the trusting process.

Bonafide revelations accompanied the answer I had sought after, and they got me good. How the subconscious mind wields quite a surprising amount of influence, how our trust decisions are a product of ourselves more than anything else. How we are capable of exhibiting great resolve, that we are not rendered helpless to our circumstances. I was caught unawares of exactly how powerful we can be. It indeed took me time, the duration of writing this opinion piece, to realise this. Nonetheless, it has empowered me to take charge of my life, and I am glad for it.

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CC0001

The Unknown Nyonyas and Babas of Singapore

Rachel Chia

"Click-clack! Click-clack!" The sound of wooden heels against a smooth, white marble floor resounded through the HDB flat. In them, stood two pairs of feet only around half the size of their owner's. Glistening multicoloured beads—especially attractive to two young girls—adorned the slender uppers of the leather slippers, forming birds and flowers and butterflies in an effortlessly intricate design (Figure 1).



Figure 1. My grandmother's *Kasut Manik*

It was not until years later that I realised the significance of these pretty shoes. These were *Kasut Manik*⁸, family heirlooms which would one day be passed down to my younger cousin and me.

During important festivals like Christmas or Chinese New Year, rich, aromatic scents of spices often infiltrated our nostrils, making our mouths water. A cacophony of sounds could be heard all day long. "Sio ah!"⁹ Onto the dinner table flew piping-hot bowls of *Ayam Buah Keluak* (Figure 2), *Itek Tim* and *Sambal Prawns*¹⁰. "Makan!"¹¹ Slipping our tiny feet out of the *Kasut Manik*, we reluctantly returned them to our grandmother's "Cabinet of Wonders," then scrambled to the table to gobble down the scrumptious feast she had lovingly prepared.



Figure 2. *Ayam Buah Keluak*
made by my grandmother

⁸ Baba Malay term for "beaded shoes".

⁹ Teochew for "Hot ah!"

¹⁰ Chicken cooked with buah keluak nut paste, salted vegetable and duck soup, and prawns fried in chili paste, respectively -- typical dishes in a Peranakan household.

¹¹ "Let's eat!" in Malay

Growing up, I knew my family differed from other Singaporean-Chinese households, but only recently I realised it is because we are Peranakan. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, “Peranakan refers primarily to Straits-born Chinese [...] and their descendants” (Gorlinski et al., 2012). Although my family members do not don *Baju Kebayas*¹² like the Nyonyas, we are very Peranakan in what we eat and how we speak—in a mixture of English, Malay, and on my father’s side, Teochew.

To better understand my culture, I interviewed my grand-uncle, Chong Fah Cheong, Singapore’s 2014 Cultural Medallion recipient. A renowned Singaporean sculptor, Fah Cheong’s works include “First Generation,” a sculpture of five boys jumping into the Singapore River, and “Budak-Budak,”¹³ a bronze *Kamcheng*¹⁴ with four children climbing atop it (Figure 3).



Figure 3. “Budak-Budak”, bronze sculpture by Chong Fah Cheong, at The Heeren

¹² Traditional dresses worn by Peranakan women; Nyonyas.

¹³ “Children” in Malay.

In our interview, Fah Cheong remarked pensively that his household spoke mainly English and never Chinese. His exposure to Baba Malay was from my great grandmother and her sister. Recalling the intimate way in which he sculpted the Peranakan children playing atop the *Kamcheng*, Fah Cheong explained that the children’s familiarity with it stems from it being an heirloom essential to their household. Moreover, the children will inherit the wealth and food heritage that the *Kamcheng* symbolises. Indeed, unity, food and heirlooms are essential to Peranakans, and I am immensely proud to be part of this community. However, with all these Peranakan heirlooms around me, why did I only discover my Peranakan heritage recently? Moreover, upon asking my friends and schoolmates about Peranakan culture, I realised that few are aware of what it entails. This begs the question: What exactly has led to the obscurity of Singapore’s Peranakan community?

In their journal article, “*The Little Nyonya* and Singapore’s national self: reflections on aesthetics, ethnicity and postcolonial state formation,” Jean Montsion and Ajay Parasram (2018), professors of International Studies, aver that Singapore occasionally reintroduces Peranakan culture as a form of local Chinese culture, to assimilate the Peranakan community into the Chinese category of the CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others) model while imbuing in Peranakans a sense of identity. The professors examine the government’s sponsoring of the popular 2008 MediaCorp television series, *The Little Nyonya*. The state

¹⁴ A porcelain receptacle for food in Peranakan households.

reintroduces Peranakan identity as part of the Chinese category using *The Little Nyonya*, whose storyline was also meant to help Peranakans overcome difficulties created by the CMIO model by “re-territorialis[ing] a local sense of Indigeneity” (Montsion & Parasram, 2018). This implies that renewing the Peranakan identity would increase their sense of belonging to Singapore.

However, I think that the effects of the CMIO model on Singapore’s communities are much more pervasive—occasionally reintroducing Peranakan culture as part of the Chinese culture will not reignite Peranakans’ sense of identity. This is because the Peranakan identity is significantly more complex than “Chinese.” Apart from English and Baba Malay, different Peranakans speak different Chinese dialects. Thus, force-fitting them into the Chinese category simply does not justify the intricacy of Peranakan culture, inadvertently suppressing it instead. Moreover, periodically reintroducing Peranakan culture will not lessen the confusion Peranakans experience either. If the state wants to assimilate Peranakans into the Chinese category, why does it keep promoting our culture?

Besides the Peranakan community, other diverse minority communities have been subdued, diluting Singapore’s multiracialism. Perhaps, we must rethink the need for racial categorisation in Singapore. Assistant Professor of Sociology, Laavanya Kathiravelu (2021) expresses this sentiment in her article “Rethinking Race: Beyond the CMIO Categorisations.” She posits that Singapore should transcend racial categorisation policies like CMIO by emphasising citizens’ national identity instead of race. This is because “[i]n

emphasising racial differences, we are also denying our commonality as members of the same nation.” Moreover, Kathiravelu argues that racial classification creates a false impression that identity and dissimilarities between communities are fixed. Thus, Singapore’s racial harmony is borne out of a fear of angering other racial communities rather than a desire for unity. To mitigate these issues, Kathiravelu suggests that the government initiates the promotion of public discourse, regarding the artificiality of racial classification.

Initially, one might think that the solution to reviving the Peranakan identity is to eradicate racial categorisation. However, Kathiravelu (2021) demonstrates that it is more important to raise awareness about the artificiality of CMIO and the need for unity among Singaporeans, as this would enable citizens to set aside our differences, imbuing in us a greater sense of national identity. Since the state has created the CMIO model, which has inadvertently led to racial division, it is essential that they redress this by facilitating public discourse about its artificiality. As Singaporeans remain apprehensive about discussing race for fear of upsetting other racial groups, promoting public discourse will encourage minority communities like the Peranakan community to reveal their opinions to the government, which can then hopefully rethink the CMIO model.

Montsion and Parasram (2018) posit that occasionally reintroducing Peranakan culture and heritage as a form of “Chineseness” would strengthen their sense of identity while “serv[ing] contemporary state designs,” since the Peranakan is portrayed as “embod[ying] the national ethos of

being grounded in culture and tradition, but with a modern and forward-looking attitude." Conversely, Kathiravelu (2021) avers that Singaporeans should focus on national identity rather than our contrived racial ones. Since the government sees racial classification as vital for maintaining racial harmony, it is unlikely to be retracted anytime soon. However, this fixation on racial categorisation has kept the state from recognising the uniqueness of Peranakan culture. Hence, rather than occasionally reintroducing Peranakan culture to increase the Peranakans' sense of identity as Montsion and Parasram imply, the existing CMIO model should be expanded to include more than four ethnic groups, giving minority communities like Peranakans their own category. This notion is not unprecedented because in 2010, Eurasians were officially recognised as a unique ethnic group, changing CMIO to CMIEO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Eurasian-Others). In fact, Kathiravelu suggests that countries like the United Kingdom and Australia allow citizens to identify with their own racial group, and that doing so will help Singapore "build a strong consensus and sense of community along the lines of an inclusive national identity" (p.25). There is enough evidence to suggest that the obscurity of Singapore's Peranakan community is due to the state's unintentional suppression of minority communities resulting from CMIO, as well as the lack of oppositional voices from these communities against force-fitting them into racial categories.

Overall, Singapore's Peranakan community is rich and diverse, and has an equal role in contributing to our multiracialism. Thus, it is a pity if this vibrant community remains unknown to others and even its own members, due to racial classification or

citizens' fear of expressing their racial views. Although we might not be able to eradicate racial categorisation in Singapore, it is crucial that we enhance it so we can not only connect with our authentic identities, but truly become "one united people, regardless of race, language or religion"—poignant words of the national pledge recited daily by every Singaporean child.

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Our Writing Practices: The Role Society Plays

Seah Wan Ni

Singlish—the patchwork patois of Singapore that amalgamates English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and other Chinese dialects like Hokkien and Teochew—is a defining trait for any proud Singaporean. The language that has become an undeniable expression of the Singapore culture is widely used in most forms of communication in Singapore. And the reason why I say this, is because I do it too. In a written conversational message thread between friends and family, it is easy to find sentences like “want *makan ltr?*” (Do you want to eat later?) or “*wah, so suay!*” (That is unfortunate!). Colloquialisms and trademark phrases like “*sia*,” “*lor*,” “*la*” and “*leh*” are also commonly used in an informal context. This code-switching way of communicating becomes habitual, especially for someone who is well-versed in Singlish. Not to mention, for someone who grew up in a country like Singapore where multilingualism contributes heavily to her linguistic diversity, sentences like “How is *Da Jie* doing?” (How is your older sister doing?) or “not my *dai ji*” (This does not concern me) are also frequently found in my writings to friends and family.

Comparing the ways my writings differ when my audience changes has also led me to notice several other details. When writing to someone personal,

be it through social media or text applications, the wonted use of abbreviated language and incomplete sentences like “*eh ltr do wat*” (What would you like to do later?) or “*meet whr?*” (Where do you want to meet?) is common practice. However, when writing to someone who holds some form of authority over me, my writings become void of informality as I use grammatically correct and complete sentences.

Observing my writing practices has allowed me to come to the very realisation that every individual has a unique writing style that reflects a certain characteristic. What my frequent use of Singlish reveals of me is the substantial influence the Singapore culture has on my writing practices. Being surrounded by people who use Singlish as a form of communication forces me to conform to what is socially acceptable and in turn use Singlish as a medium of communication. How this affects the way I write can be seen from the dropping of conjugational endings, plural markers and prepositions, as well as the convergence of languages in my writings. Moreover, the act of subconsciously changing the style of writing in accordance with the situation we were put into is one that reveals the hidden ways our writing betrays our upbringing. And in this case of

Singapore, it would be how Confucianism has burrowed deep into my identity, making it nearly impossible for me to get rid of the habit of writing professionally to someone of authority. The heavy reliance on hierarchical relationships that Singaporeans were taught from young to retain have shaped the way we interact with others and is portrayed through our writing practices. It has struck me that my writing practices are symbiotic with the culture I immerse myself in. The way we write reflects the many ways our community and society have an influence on ourselves, which then begs the question: How has living in a society like Singapore affected our writing?

In a study done by Haun and Tomasello (2011), the phenomenon of conformity to societal pressure in children was thoroughly explored and investigated on. What was demonstrated through the study was that children are highly susceptible to peer pressure and that conformity is vital as a “function in the transmission of human culture by promoting quick and stable in-group uniformity” (p.1759). It was revealed that children are sensitive individuals who tend to conform to the majority despite themselves. Haun and Tomasello presented the view that sensitivity to social influence is an indication that the young are beginning to exhibit conformist tendencies that contribute to the foundation of social learning.

On the issue of how people's behaviour changes when living in a society, Haun and Tomasello (2011) have provided me with a fresh point of view. Seeing that people start displaying conformist tendencies at an early age, the desire to be accepted as part of a social group is clearly the fundamental of human

nature. As social beings, people are driven to fit in, and this usually means observing status-quo and giving in to societal pressure in an effort to assimilate into the community. At its best, conformity fosters a sense of belonging and group identity. And how this affects us can clearly be seen in every decision we make. Our writing habits, for example, will exhibit a selective characteristic that is unique to the specific social group we are trying to integrate into. In the context of Singapore, the need for Singaporeans to be assimilated into a particular social group plays a huge part in the way we interact with others. The use of Singlish draws on the emotive side of people and adds a personal touch to the interaction between an individual and another social group. How this need to appeal to another person translates to our writing is our habitual use of phrases like “*eh* don't like that *la*” in a text conversation as an attempt to mitigate the impact of a dissension. But what makes things so interesting to look at is that for a country that is a melting pot of ethnic cultures, Singlish becomes crucial in the linguistic scene in Singapore. This language essentially becomes a neutral bridge between cultures and ethnicities, eradicating language barriers and establishing a perfect medium for all to communicate. This further substantiates my point that the Singapore culture breeds generation after generation of people who rely heavily on Singlish as a form of communication. And what feeds this continuous cycle and adoption of the Singlish language is children's innate ability to observe, adapt and conform to societal expectations as suggested by Haun and Tomasello (2011). How this changes the way we write can be seen from our blatant disregard for grammar rules and proper sentence structures.

More interestingly, the impact that our society has on our writing practices may go far beyond what we could possibly comprehend. The fundamental nature of human beings has people succumb to societal influences at the drop of a hat. What this simply means is that social values are deeply and innately embedded within us and can potentially affect every action we make. A case in point could be seen from the impacts of having Confucian values socialised as part of the social ethos of Singapore on the people living in this society. What is essentially one of the core beliefs in Confucianism is the respect for hierarchy and authority. Consequently, it is not difficult to fathom why the people living in Singapore tend to follow strictly to the hierarchical structure in the society. This effect is obvious enough that it is portrayed through the young's ability to code-switch between the Singlish language and the proper English language when communicating with their elders, merely because it is deemed disrespectful to interact informally with their elders. Singaporean's veneration of hierarchy also contributes to the over authoritarian state that is Singapore. The result would be a somewhat blind submission to authority, or dare I say, a fear of authority. And the consequence of such a culture is presented through the many decisions we make, including the choice of words we choose to write, which brings me nicely to my next point.

My writing habits may not necessarily all be influenced by the desire to maintain status-quo. They appear to also be coming from a different place—one that seems to be more precedented than ever. In a book chapter written by Cherian George (2012), the topic of media oppression in Singapore was discussed. He explored the concept

of censorship in Singapore and mentioned that "the fragility of the government's commitment to liberalisation [is] apparent" (p.195). He presented the idea that the Singapore's press is reluctant to challenge the restrictive laws imposed on freedom of speech in Singapore, which he then ruled as the result of Singapore's Confucius society. George highlighted the struggles of journalists who have trouble finding the balance between free press and offending censorship laws in Singapore.

The concept of censorship is not foreign in any society. What the culture of censorship essentially breeds is the constant need to always say the right things. The insistent fear of being called out for any unconservative and candid remarks is the ultimate enforcer of obedience and compliance, especially when a conservative society like Singapore imposes strict and uncompromising laws about what is being written on the Internet. And how this affects the way we write in a public space can be seen from the shift in writing content to one that is much more conventional and orthodox. In comparison to other westernised societies, people in Singapore tend to avoid sensitive topics and edgy language to save themselves from any trouble. What self-censorship does is virtually eradicating any personal voice and individuality in our writings, promoting a style of writing that portrays a set of opinions that specifically avoids challenging existing problems. But going beyond this, living in a society like Singapore with high levels of censorship also stunts creativity and ingenuity in people. Any atypical topics discussed are shunned and frowned upon, and what this creates is a population of like-minded individuals who seek to fit into the box society puts us in.

The underlying principle that Haun (2011), Tomasello (2011) and George (2012) were trying to build upon is the idea of cultural uniformity. As suggested by Haun and Tomasello, the desire to fit in and be accepted as part of a community creates an environment that moulds an individual into having similar characteristics as the next person. Coupled with self-censorship, it is no wonder that unoriginality bleeds into our work and affects the authenticity of our writing. But what Haun and Tomasello seemed to also suggest was people's eagerness to dive head-first into a situation just to express their consensus. With this consideration in mind, it seemed odd that George would focus on people's tendency to remain silent and reserved about their opinions because of self-censorship. However, putting the two different opinions into conversation got me thinking. The primary reason for writing is to communicate and exchange ideas in a society. While we appear to be the driver of our own thoughts, like it or not, our beliefs and values are heavily influenced by our society. Ultimately, what this does to our writing practices is shaping them into something more identifiable as a community. Be it national identity or societal values, such principles are embedded in our thoughts, behaviours and cultures and are, therefore, inevitably reflected in our writings.

Looking further into this, however, I am intrigued the most by the irony behind Singaporeans' use of the Singlish language. As mentioned above, the Singlish language provides somewhat of a refuge for the people living in Singapore, making interactions between two individuals much more personal and intimate. The result would inevitably be creating an environment where people become

more open and less censored with one another. Ironically, this Singlish language may also result in a much more pervasive impact on the people living in Singapore, because while Singlish may be deemed socially acceptable in Singapore, it is not the case when put into the global context. What happens is that Singlish becomes the language of the lesser people, creating this stigma of having used a language that disregards sound grammatical rules and proper sentence structures. And this is where self-censorship comes to play as Singaporeans code-switch to use proper English when interacting with others to portray themselves as more refined or posh. Eventually, I cannot help but question how Singaporeans' writing practices are affected by such an impact. The conclusion that came thereafter is that the Singapore society may not necessarily have a negative impact on the way we write, because what it does is that it cultivates in people this ability to adapt and code-switch (afterall, code-switching is the bulk of the Singlish language) in our writings, making it far easier for us Singaporeans to assimilate and form bonds with another individual.

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CC0001

Traditional Mosaic Playgrounds as a Form of Heritage

Alveryn Yee Su Ern

The shrill screams of several rambunctious children resonated across the wide expanse of space as I stepped into the very place which fervently held many of my treasured childhood memories—the fruit-themed playground in Tampines Central Park. A burst of colours filled my vision as I shifted my gaze towards the familiar watermelon slide and mangosteen domes. The blend of fiery red, mellow yellow and deep emerald mosaic pieces was sharply juxtaposed against the concrete residential buildings, injecting an element of fun into the neighbourhood. I gently glided my fingertips across the cold, smooth mosaic tiles and peeked through the small watermelon-seed shaped holes, noting that there were children of varying ages playing together. Some had plastic pacifiers gripped tightly between their baby teeth, waddling around with a small pinkie wrapped around the fingers of their anxious parents who hovered around them constantly. Some, their baby cheeks filled out, were older and took on the responsibility of guiding the younger ones around.

It was interesting to note that the children had fully utilised every aspect of the playground—the slide, the area in the dome structure and even the wide-open space around them. They were not limited by the playground structures and stirred their creative

juices by making up their own games. I observed how some threw their slippers around to play an exciting round of '*Poison Tag*,' charging around energetically like hungry predators hunting for prey. Their matted hair stuck to their foreheads, with beads of sweat trickling down the sides of their faces.

Following the trail of a small boy who whizzed past me on a four-wheeled kick scooter, I walked to the opposite end of the park and realised that there were two newly built playgrounds. Both playgrounds were fitted with multiple short slides, ladders and structures for the children to climb on. Personally, they clearly had no distinct identity to them and were in stark contrast to the watermelon slide and the mangosteen domes, which on the other hand, had a story to tell. Inspired by the many fruit farms that were once in Tampines (National Heritage Board, 2020), these fruit-themed mosaic structures were built as a form of a tangible memory of the area's history. As I turned on my heels to head home, I could not remove my mental image of the two extremes, the modern and the traditional, coexisting in the same space. It made me wonder—why were they so similar yet so different? Both playgrounds delivered and gave children the space to play, but one was run-of-the-

mill while the other was memorable. These traditional mosaic playgrounds function as a form of “built heritage” which contributes to Singapore’s identity. This begs the question: what purpose do mosaic playgrounds serve today and how important is it to preserve them?

In an article published in the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Chang and Mah (2020) discuss the topic of traditional mosaic playgrounds in Singapore and how these playgrounds, although not of great historical significance, have value when individuals attach meaning to them. The heritage status of a place is contingent on “everyday users who determine the existential authenticity of heritage space through their patronage and perceptions,” according to Chang and Mah (p.503). They place great importance in the experiences of individuals with regards to the heritage place in question, for it is only when there is active engagement that the site goes beyond just being a physical landmark to one that has meaning to the people. Heritage is defined as a continuous process that “becomes” rather than one that is stagnant and does not change (p.512). It constantly evolves as each individual has different memories attached to the place and hence varying interpretations of it. The definition of designated heritage is subjective and “open to contestation, often on highly personal and individual grounds” (p.512). They argue that it is through this subjectivity and resultant dissonance and consonance that makes heritage an ever-dynamic process.

Chang and Mah (2020) stress the importance of the individual's voice and interpretation with regards to deciding what constitutes heritage, which helps to

justify the designation of traditional mosaic playgrounds as heritage sites. These playgrounds hold fond memories for people who have had first-hand experiences playing, interacting with other individuals and forging memories with their family members. One can freely have access to playgrounds, making them “everyday heritage” (p.513). This makes it easier for one to identify and relate to it, since it is not an experience that is solely limited to a certain group of people. The purpose of these traditional playgrounds therefore lies in functioning as a living time capsule of memories, one where individuals can physically go to, allowing them to revisit and relive their past memories.

A critical heritage scholar David Harvey, in his 2015 research paper titled “Landscape and heritage: trajectories and consequences,” posits that while individual interpretations of heritage are important, the focus should lie on how each individual's thoughts come together as a collective whole to define what a heritage is. Harvey (2015) argues that “the immediate, ephemeral and immersive experience of the self is important—but only as a touchstone for something that requires us to go beyond the self” (p.920). One's personal memories and emotions associated with the heritage site are but an amalgamation of the actions and responses of oneself and others who were present during that experience. The interaction between one's self, the environment and the surrounding objects will dictate how deeply ingrained the experience will be in our minds. Harvey then claims that there is a need to “heed the experiences and work of others,” suggesting that drawing on the experiences of others, in addition to the individual, is of the essence (p.920). These collectively shared memories that

ordinary people have of the heritage site then adds to its value, for it goes beyond just one individual and extends meaning to a larger audience.

Harvey's (2015) work provides a fresh perspective on the idea that an everyday heritage site, like playgrounds, does not only gain significance when individuals have formed memories around it and have attached their own interpretations as well as meanings to it. The paper prompts us to think that there is more meaning and connection established when these experiences go beyond the individual. In my opinion, this suggests that these traditional mosaic playgrounds are considered an everyday heritage site and that they should be preserved. This is because the experiences that an individual has at a playground is not limited to just that individual, but also to others who have made use of that same shared space at different points in time.

As an only child, trips to the playground became my main source of social interaction with my contemporaries. Even though we shared the same physical play space, going down the same slide and sitting on the same swing, each of us retained a different set of cherished memories. To the other children, I might have been one of the friendly faces by the slides to grin at or perhaps I was just another stranger who enthusiastically participated in their games of *Hide and Seek*. As for me, they were my playmates who could elevate my one-man games into full-fledged ones. Although every child would have to leave the playground someday, they need not leave their shared memories behind. Hence, this corroborates the point that while both Chang and Mah (2020) as well as Harvey (2015) acknowledge the importance of an individual's experience in

determining heritage, Harvey does not stop there but goes on to elevate this individual experience into a communal and universal one.

Indeed, these traditional mosaic playgrounds function as a physical entity that remains standing with the passage of time and is a living representation of both the past as well as the present. Memories of the past are preserved and new memories are forged when these spaces are utilised by individuals. In my opinion, what makes playing at these playgrounds a universal experience is how accessible it is to all individuals regardless of their different social classes, for this shared space breaks down the barriers of class and unites all through the element of play. Hence, I argue that it is when this shared experience transcends time, class and space, that these traditional playgrounds become truly worthy of being preserved as a form of "built heritage."

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CC0001

The Online Influence of Crystals: Not One with the Earth?

Naomi Leong

"Odd," I mused one day, perplexed the 'ice spheres' in this jug were never cold—nor melt at all. Asking my mother comedically late another night, I found out they were rose quartz. As an avid crystal enthusiast, she stated they heighten mental clarity. Upon further investigation, I interviewed the CEO of *fengshui* consultancy Imperial Harvest David Goh, through a Zoom call, who then explained they also "[improve] relationships" and bring calmness.

I then looked further into Singapore's crystal community through the shop Mystique Gallery from David and my mother's suggestions. Within the eclectically decorated walls, I similarly felt calmness and mental clarity from the dozens of rose quartz and other crystals inside. The few customers, including my family, consulted with sibling owners Andy and Christina in whispers. Some even rested on massage tables in an adjoining dim room for reiki (energy healing technique). Either from inexperience or scepticism, I was reticent from first entering to selecting my crystal accessories. The other customers fit in quite well, however. Among the thirty- or forty-something-year-old women were two equally engaged girls of my age.

These girls make up the surprising growing

phenomenon of young adult crystal customers and sellers since the beginning of Singapore's first circuit breaker. They typically connect more on social media, especially on local Instagram stores. Retailers like @crystycrystals livestream and advertise from desks full of colourful trinkets with well-manicured hands. They also advise on where to place crystals for positive energy or how to cleanse them (Goh, 2021; Crsty Crystals, 2021). Here, younger generations participate equally as consumers and entrepreneurs. Affordable prices and the ease of online platforms make any crystals and their metaphysical benefits accessible. Since crystals are "one-size-fits-all" goods (Goh, 2021), anyone can utilise their powers.

Millennials and Gen Z are generally "open-minded" (Goh, 2021) about stress alleviation and healing from supplementary and conventional medicine. As word-of-mouth spreads and businesses establish their online presence, people can engage with each other and improve mental well-being during an isolating time like the current COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, youths take mental and emotional health into their own hands while investing in an ever-growing business. Although crystals are becoming a popular respite like other wellness commodities

from daily stresses and worries, they also come with certain risks and potential scams. Therefore, one must ask: how does the commoditisation of crystals on social media affect the ethics of the healing crystal industry?

How crystals became a multibillion-dollar industry

(CNBC Make It, 2019) mostly explores supply and demand in the modern crystal market. Co-chairman of the world-renowned crystal showcase Tucson Gem and Mineral Show, Peter Megaw, suggests that the recent rise in customers comes from a collective increased belief in crystals' healing abilities. But despite the marketed efficacy, there is currently no scientific backing to them. Instead, healing properties result from the placebo effect and a patient's belief. Furthermore, the video illuminates that "scarcity trumps spirituality" (CNBC Make It, 2019, 9:10) since exponential mining leads to inflated pricing from decreasing supply. Nonetheless, premium US-based crystal proprietor Lenise Soren explains "the combination of people seeing the [healing benefits] and that there's literally not as many" available crystals as before perpetuates the market (CNBC Make It, 2019, 7:57), although she expresses that customers also need to look for ethical stones.

The video questions the industry's ethics regarding murky claims of crystals' healing efficacy and unregulated crystal harvesting. As few peer-reviewed studies exist on the subject, it is conceivable that misinformation about crystal healing can spread online. Even other processes involved like mindfulness and meditation, which crystal healers purport can positively impact people's well-being, have not been rigorously

tested. As for mining, increased demand correlates with exacerbating labour and environmental problems. Whether wilfully or genuinely ignorant, some merchants do not disclose where they source crystals. It is concerning that there is not enough scrutiny on the global supply chain from crystal mining to merchants.

Conversely, Dr. Alex Fitzpatrick's (2021) *"Take two amethysts and call me in the morning": Crystal healing and pseudoarchaeology* investigates the crystal movement through archaeology and sociology. While most experts assent that modern crystal healing as pseudoscientific, Fitzpatrick is more concerned with its false rhetoric and pseudoarchaeology. Crystal use was first documented in Ancient Greek and medieval times but at present, it has spread globally, such as is seen in indigenous rituals in the Americas. However, modern crystal healing is not derived from traditional practices, but instead "relies heavily on cultural appropriation" (p.4), the inappropriate use of elements from different cultures. This is prominent with the appropriation of spiritual energy concepts like qi from Chinese tradition and chakra from Hinduism and Buddhism. Additionally, Fitzpatrick warns that holistic healing communities could be vulnerable to "conspiracy theories such as QAnon making its way" along with "fascist, white supremacist beliefs" (p.5). She states with enough people who subscribe to such extremism, extreme attacks would occur, such as the US Capitol insurrection in 2020.

Like CNBC, Fitzpatrick's (2021) blog post implies uncritical crystal consumption would bolster unethical mining, as revenue primarily influences

industries to continue any practice regardless of labour and safety regulations. Cultural appropriation is not often thought about in a Singaporean context because Singapore is built on integrating customs, especially from Chinese and South Asian cultures. Nevertheless, there is a fine line between cultural appreciation and appropriation since appropriation can lead to crystal communities and adjacent circles unknowingly disrespecting and profiting more from traditions than the original cultures, whether it be social or financial gain. Furthermore, Fitzpatrick conflates pseudoscientific and pseudoarchaeological concepts as potential gateways to extreme-right ideology, which can skew straw-manning moderate and conservative individuals to having such beliefs. However, current efforts to combat dangerous socio-political ideas are merited to prevent further harm.

Fitzpatrick (2021) and CNBC (2019) thus provide many perspectives on how increased demand can influence the crystal industry's ethics to which the internet had contributed. Both discuss healing crystals' efficacy and cultural mainstay through psychologist Christopher French and historian Marisa Galvez respectively. For instance, CNBC and Fitzpatrick mention French's unpublished 2001 study on crystals and placebos, linking it to the current dearth of scientific proof (5:44; p.2). While CNBC (2019) has Galvez validating crystals' medicinal and spiritual associations throughout history (0:55), Fitzpatrick cites her to emphasise that "the assignment of worldly (and otherworldly) powers" to crystals is imposed by people (p.3). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of belief is strong, as many unsubstantiated testimonies report positive

results in emotional well-being and confidence. Users personalising their treatment through holistic healing is a less-spoken-about advantage when the current pandemic has overwhelmed many healthcare institutions.

Nonetheless, a pressing issue is the vulnerability of people becoming too invested in crystals and their communities, something I initially fear upon learning about various online health cases gone wrong. According to French, crystals should be studied more to provide more "consumer protection" (CNBC, 2019, 6:32). Similarly, Fitzpatrick's caution lies with innocent customers falling prey to dangerous conspiracy theories. As a mainstream lifestyle trend heightened by celebrity endorsements (2019, 0:13; 2021, p.1), the risks become even more likely, if not reality already. I may not agree to the extent that Fitzpatrick (2021) calls for pushing back "even the earliest entry points" (p.6) against fascism, but I understand the need for more critical thinking and consumption, considering that casual customers still pay a lot of money regardless of the scientific status of crystals (CNBC, 2019, 6:13).

Overall, I believe the most crucial concern expressed is the crystal industry's insufficient transparency. Although the internet can educate many on crystals, there is still ignorance on the industry's societal and environmental impact, leading to inaction. Since the advent of social media, crystals correlate to more harm than good—that is, with the industry's limited regulation. Even though Fitzpatrick and CNBC focus on the US, I argue Singapore can experience more ramifications because of its high concentration of traditional and

New Age sellers, and its inability to harvest local crystals. Storefronts like Mystique Gallery and Imperial Harvest are diligent in ethical sourcing, but the same cannot be said for small outlets and young customers, especially on social media. This had made me more conscious to learn about the story and source of the crystals that my family, peers, and the rest of the crystal community consume—including those who put crystals in their drinks. Personally, using crystals requires an open mind for its controversies and its allure.

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CC0001

The Power of Belief and Effort Amidst Challenge

Jeverey Chiang

I enter the MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) gym.

As I step through the door, the smell of air freshener pervades the air, with the stench of sweat surprisingly absent, thanks to the gym's cleanliness. The trainees are unleashing their arsenal of techniques on the sand-filled punching bags, producing loud, repeated snaps and bangs of deafening impact, with each explosive hit ringing out as if it were the blast of a shotgun. The striking specialists who are engaged in their routine sparring are moving with calculated precision, in a beautiful dance of execution and evasion of attacks. Nearby, the grapplers are hunched over, pawing and gripping at each other, looking for openings in the opponent's structure. The grapplers who are already on the ground are engaged in a battle of positional advantages, periodically catching their breath in between explosive bouts of physical exertion.

It is easy to see that these activities are difficult and require a great deal of exertion to perform. One might describe the training process as painful, both physically and mentally. However, the martial artists return to training daily, disregarding their discomfort. What is it that allows or encourages them to repeatedly return and engage in such painful and strenuous activities?

This trait of persevering amidst challenges—the challenge-perseverance ethic—is prevalent in the realm of martial arts. In fact, this challenge-perseverance ethic is also present in other domains, such as work, school and sports. Why is it that this ethic exists, and continues to persist, even outside the realm of martial arts? If our diverse communities in Singapore are able to use it, how will it benefit them?

In the Lucifer Effect, Dr Zimbardo (2007) argues that moral disengagement and social approval are important behavioural processes in committing cruelty. He explains that people can “disengage the self-sanctions that regulate their behaviour” at “certain times” (p.310) in response to moral situations. With disengagement, we discard our perceived culpability. Disengagement removes personal stakes from acts, disregarding pain or challenge experienced in achieving the goal. It produces a task-completion attitude, and conjoins with social approval’s effects to complete tasks.

From a ritualistic perspective, a ritual is a set of regular actions conducted for a purpose. The action’s contents are unimportant, regardless of morality. Only task completion and results will matter. Killing others in war is not necessarily

reprehensible, but rather just framed as ‘pest control,’ and ‘a process to the goal.’¹⁵ Any pain, mental or physical, can be blocked out by disengagement. Thus, disengagement is present in both committing cruelty, and in task-completing ritualistic practices.

Even if committing atrocities under command is unpalatable, the power of social approval can encourage engagement in the ritual.¹⁶

Despite its macabre origin, I believe that disengagement is useful in self-enhancement rituals. These are regular action sets for self-betterment. An example would be exercising regularly to achieve fitness. However, consistently starting and carrying out these action sets and rituals is difficult, especially with stressful actions.

Though seemingly counterintuitive, I will posit that using disengagement—found in acts of human evil—will support goal-oriented self-enhancement rituals, especially for painful processes. When facing challenges, one can disengage from the stress, regarding it as a part of the process. Workload completion for the goal is prioritised over the challenges. Using this, athletes can grind through their daily training. Coupled with the pressure of social approval, if others are completing their daily goals, one will also be psychologically nudged to do likewise. Thus, disengagement supports a ritualistic challenge-perseverance ethic.

¹⁵ In the Rape of Rwanda, where Tutsis were mass killed and raped, the Hutus were merely “doing a job to order” (Zimbardo, 2007, p15) to “exterminate” the “cockroaches”.

¹⁶ In World War Two, otherwise normal elderly German men became mass murderers due to the social approval given to those who started killing first (Zimbardo, 2007; Browning, 1993, p.

Although disengagement is powerful in ignoring pain for a goal, it has a limitation—one must believe in the ritual’s outcome. Athletes believe that the skill gained through practice outweighs the exhaustion of training. The person must believe in the cause, with the outcome outweighing any pain suffered for it.

Without the belief in the outcome, disengagement will fail. People generally do not bear prolonged pain for a disagreeable cause. Athletes would not train if the pain of training outweighs their perceived value of their sporting excellence. Additionally, if the German men valued social approval less than safeguarding their morals, they would not have voluntarily become killers. This is thus a critical limitation.

Next, in Duhigg’s (2012) *Power of Habit*, Duhigg discusses a habit formation framework. Being termed as the Habit Loop, it consists of a cue to start the habit, followed by a routine behaviour, and a reward for action completion. A habit begins when a cue is recognised by a person. A cue can be anything that provides a visual, auditory, sensory, or mental stimulus that is associated with a specific habit. Two examples of such cues include: alarms set at specific timings to indicate the start of certain activities (an alarm set at 1 P.M. may induce attitudes in a person to follow his lunchtime routine), and certain objects which can trigger certain habit-related mental states (the sight of a

xvi). Some were initially too fraught with guilt to kill their supposed enemies, but the allure of social approval (Zimbardo, 2007, p221) and acceptance into the in-group of killers proved too strong. Many eventually committed to in-group killing rituals, and even took celebratory photographs with their dead targets.

cookie jar may trigger a cookie-lover to start to crave cookies). The actions are driven by a craving to obtain something, and these strong desires solidify the habit. While one might view habits as stubborn mental processes, Duhigg (2007, p.57) explains that obtaining positive habits is possible by manipulating the Loop's components. In Duhigg's own experience, by changing his original routine, he gained a better habit of directly approaching his colleagues to socialise at breaktime, and was rewarded with his desired social activity, without changing anything else. In this manner, Duhigg has demonstrated that it is in fact possible to change one's habits to more beneficial ones by actively manipulating the components of one's own Habit Loop.

At first glance, it may seem that the concepts of both ritual and habit are almost identical. However, it is important to note the distinction between them. A ritual is a set of regular actions performed for an express purpose which is achieved as something outside of those actions, and is consciously kept in mind throughout the ritual. In contrast, a habit is a routine that is set off by a cue and driven by a craving for something, culminating in a reward which solidifies the habit. Unlike a ritual, a habit is instinctual, and satisfying the craving and finishing the routine is done for its own sake. There is no extra purpose to a habit, until it is used in a ritual. To illustrate, a basketballer might have a habit of throwing a basketball into a hoop once he stands in a certain position in a basketball court, which is driven by an instance of a craving to score a point in a match. However, the consistent ritual practice of throwing a basketball into a hoop will contribute towards the overall purpose and goal of the ritual—

to improve the basketballer's throwing skills and proficiency in the sport. In short, the difference between a ritual and a habit is that a ritual has an overarching purpose, while a habit does not.

Next, as self-enhancement rituals are just sets of repeated actions for a positive goal, they are directly analogous to habit formation.

Therefore, these findings are applicable in forming ritualistic positive habits. One just has to identify the cues (the visual, auditory, sensory or mental stimuli associated with certain habits), routines, rewards, and cravings for our actions, and manipulate them to achieve one's goals. Athletes could set a cue, such as hearing the start of a timer, and conduct a training routine for the reward of increased skill. The desire for excellence would fuel the routine. Regularly receiving the cues and performing the routines causes ritualistic behaviour. This framework can easily guide goal-oriented personal rituals. Therefore, habit formation techniques can form and facilitate self-enhancement rituals.

However, there is a limitation—positive habit formation requires effort. Without effort, the components in the framework are unformed or unchanged, and the desired ritual cannot materialise. A person desiring daily exercise is unlikely to do it unless he identifies the cues encouraging his exercise, actively pursues them, changes his original routine, and understands his reward of and craving for physical fitness. Therefore, the challenge-perseverance ethic cannot exist and persist without effort.

Unfortunately, the limitations of required belief in the cause and effort may disable both powerful

frameworks.¹⁷ Therefore, I will propose a more effective and applicable four-step framework, the Belief-Effort Dynamic. Belief and effort are its foundation and driving force. First, one must convince himself to follow a cause. It will be easier to act for a cause that one generally agrees with. In addition, simply having a cause to work towards does not mean that it will be achieved. It is the strong belief in and personal support for the cause that provides the driving force for one to continually carry out the actions necessary to achieve the cause. Furthermore, the belief also gives stability to the ritual over time, as one will be less likely to abandon it. Second, when facing stress in the ritual, using disengagement can lessen the pain, making the ritual easier to start and continue. Third, one can manipulate the components in their Habit Loop to encourage ritual formation and persistence, making it easier to continue with the rituals. Fourth, one must be sure that he can put sustained effort in maintaining the components of the habit. Without it, the positive rituals cannot begin to form or persist.

It is easy to see how this positive ritual framework can be applied to society's members. The average martial artist can find a goal that he believes in, such as mastering a technique, and form a daily training ritual to bring him closer to his goal. His belief

stabilises the ritual and it is less likely to be abandoned. Next, he can use disengagement to reduce the pain in training, making the ritual less daunting. He can then adjust the components of his Habit Loop to make the ritual easier to execute. If he puts in consistent effort, the ritual becomes ingrained as a habit, and it becomes easier to start and complete. Over time, steady progress will be made, and the technique may be mastered. Like this, the martial artist has used the Belief-Effort Dynamic in a self-enhancement ritual, exhibiting a challenge-perseverance ethic.

At its core, the challenge-perseverance ethic only requires two concepts—belief and effort. The potency of both belief and effort underlies all the components of the frameworks that we have seen, making them possible and persistent. With simple belief and effort, almost anyone in society can chase their dreams with a dogged determination, even in the face of adversity.

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I would like to thank my Professor, Dr. Tan Mia Huan, for giving me insights which allowed me to better organise and consolidate my arguments. I was able to further distil the crucial parts of my arguments because of her help. Once again, thank

¹⁷ In my analysis of the two frameworks, I have come to believe that the complementary nature of both frameworks of Disengagement and the Habit Loop actually makes them even stronger in forming positive rituals.

Within an action set for a goal, Disengagement can relieve pain, and prevent the ritual's interruption. In the Habit Loop framework, manipulating the Loop's components affects the mechanisms that materialise the ritual. The ritual can be encouraged to start with a cue. Driven by a craving, it will be carried out and the reward satisfies the craving. The Habit Loop framework provides a ground for disengagement to be applied. While the ritual is being carried out after the cue, disengagement deflects the stress of doing the actions. Completing the ritual is easier due to the reduced stress. With a less painful ritual, it is much easier to willingly respond to the cues and start the process. Over time, it will be easier to start and finish the ritual— it has become a habit. The two are complementary frameworks, forming a self-sustaining positive cycle. They make the framework of positive rituals stronger in its formation and persistence.

Despite this, they are both still susceptible to the limitations of required belief in the cause and effort.

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CC0001

The Evolution of Community

Jordan Teo Cheng Jie

Punggol is derived from the Malay word for “hurling sticks at the branches of fruit trees to bring them down to the ground” (NParks, 2021, p.1). It is also the name of the north-eastern coast of Singapore, home to Jewel Bridge on which I am standing. Gazing into the lush vegetation across the shimmering waters, I could see how this derivation came about. A congregation of villagers encircle a lone coconut tree, a notable distance separating the two. Distinguished hunters fling carefully carved sticks shaped by a rudimentary understanding of aerodynamics, aimed with laser-like precision at the prized fruits. The village’s young run amok as they cheer the hunters on, unfazed by the barrage of spears raining down onto the ground. A whoosh, a thump, and a thud. Uproar. The squeals of children pierce the air, fuelled by the anticipation of devouring the juicy jelly-like flesh of the young coconut.

Back on Jewel Bridge, a baby’s cry is heard in the background, albeit muted by the chatter of cyclists littered across the bridge, bicycles neatly lining the railings. Awestruck children beside their families gaze into the calm waters, unperturbed by the bustle of parents clambering to get their children a better view and a prettier photograph. I too was not spared of the irony of scrambling to capture the peace and tranquillity of what lies ahead, while

battling to hide the cacophony of the rowdy weekend crowd. What stood on the bridge did not feel like a community, but merely a congregation of individual units.

The contrast between the two scenes is astoundingly stark. It was once commonplace for people to selflessly render help and support in the past, whereas on that bridge we will need to scour the earth to find someone willing to voluntarily take a photo for you instead of seeing you as yet another nuisance obstructing their perfect shot. In less than a century, our community spirit, colloquially known as Kampung Spirit, has seemingly vanished into thin air. As we delve deeper, it is obvious that the yearning for community has never left us. Scrambling to upload our best lives onto social media, we bask in whatever validation that comes from the numbers on our screen, masking the loneliness that comes with it. We bury our heads into our mobile phones as we take the elevator, escaping from any awkward contact we may have with people of our own community, be it work, school or even our own home. We are quick to shun those who approach us, painting our own narrative on their intentions. “They must be trying to sell me something!” I justify to myself, as I hurriedly wave them away to scroll through advertisements on social media. La Vie En Paranoia—a narrative of our

current times. It is imperative to ask ourselves, how has the concept of *Kampung Spirit* eroded over time? Have we lost our sense of community in Singapore?

In *Making of a “kampung spirit” in modern Singapore*, Wee (2019) argues that *Kampung Spirit* is a form of social capital. According to Wee, *Kampung Spirit* at its core serves as an enabler to foster deeper intertwined social networks within the community. The emanation of this “catalyst” can be observed in the fact that “Kampungs of the past never closed their doors” (p.4), which displays the magnitude of *Kampung Spirit* that kampungs had in the past. Unfortunately, Wee discovered that despite government intervention of providing the necessary space and conditions for the residents to interact, “residents do not actively seek to form new relationships as they have other priorities such as work and existing relationships” (p.23). Wee’s analysis of *Kampung Spirit* confirms the unfortunate but unsurprising notion that it has lost its relevance today. As we no longer prioritise forming close relationships with our neighbours, the impetus for doing so has naturally been made redundant. This leads to a vicious cycle where we would feel uncomfortable to initiate contact due to the lack of *Kampung Spirit*, which leads to a further decline in *Kampung Spirit* in the long run. However, is there more to *Kampung Spirit* than being a catalyst?

Goh (2014) offers her own definition of *Kampung Spirit* in her paper *Examining the past in the present: kampung memories and nostalgia in contemporary Singapore*, contending that it is the familial ties within a community that define *Kampung Spirit*. This detracts from the prominent

definition of *Kampung Spirit* which simply consists of “helping each other and cooperation” (p.21), which led Goh to deduce that “kampung spirit in contemporary discourse is used in a superficial sense with the aim to foster greater cohesion within a community” (p.21). Goh, who claims that as we constantly move to improve our living conditions, “the revival of ‘kampung spirit’ can be said to be difficult or almost not possible to be infused in contemporary Singapore” (p.23). Goh’s research uncovers that not only did *Kampung Spirit* lose its appeal today, the very meaning of *Kampung Spirit* has also gradually lost its substance over time. This goes to show that in addition to the waning of *Kampung Spirit* in recent times, it has also ‘eroded’ connotatively.

From the analysis of *Kampung Spirit* by both Wee (2019) and Goh (2014), we can deduce that only the sense of community togetherness has been preserved today, but not any social or physical conditions that were once associated to the *kampung*. While Wee and Goh differ on the composition of *Kampung Spirit*, they both concur that it has lost its relevance today. Therefore, one might conclude that due today’s circumstances, we have lost the essence of *Kampung Spirit*, and that we will have to grasp at straws to restore it to its fullest glory. But is that really the case? We might find ourselves replying to a work email on the elevator instead of making small talk with a stranger, or scrolling through social media during our daily commute, but does that mean that we have lost sight of the *Kampung Spirit* that we possessed just a few decades ago?

On the contrary, I argue that *Kampung Spirit* has not

waned, but instead adapted together with the evolution of society. While I concede that the *Kampung Spirit* of yesteryears that we often sentimentalize has indeed lost its charm, what Wee (2019) and Goh (2014) fail to realise is that in their rhetoric of *Kampung Spirit*, the parameters of the 'community' that they allude to has expanded over time. Due to the advancement of technology, we are no longer bound to just our residential community and are members of different communities far and wide, possessing extensive social networks far beyond what was imaginable in the past. Be it a school community or even an interest-based community online, these communities that we can now be a part of are no less of a community than that of our residential one. After the tragic incident at River Valley High School earlier this year which saw the passing of one of her students, over three thousand members of the school community stood in solidarity, offering their comfort and support to those who need it. This show of unity and resilience amidst calamity goes to show how deep the familial ties of the River Valley community runs, a quintessential example of *Kampung Spirit*.

Ultimately, we must realise that it would be unfair to hold *Kampung Spirit* to any outdated rubric and yearn for its 'return' today. With Singapore as one of the world's most competitive economy (Straits Times, 2020, p.1), we are progressively getting busier as we strive towards better living standards and juggling between the different communities that we belong to, all while having the same twenty-four hours a day. We should instead shift our focus onto embracing what it has evolved into and strive to adapt to our ever-dynamic society. It is through this acceptance for what *Kampung Spirit* has

become that we can appreciate what it has done to improve our social fabric and will continue to do so in the distant future.

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CC0001

Building Sustainable Landscapes

Nadiah Binte Mohamad Azman

Jurong Lake Gardens is known as the ideal spot for families to spend time with their loved ones as they immerse themselves in the beauty that nature has to offer. From the top of the wooden boardwalk whose colour has seemed to fade from years of wear and tear, the sounds of birds chirping from the branches of a mangrove tree and bicycle chains rattling across the wooden planks of the boardwalk echoed in my ears. The boardwalk overlooked the murky lake that rippled in the heat of the midday sun. It was lined with man-made floating wetlands serving as homes to Crepe Ginger flowers that protruded towards the sky as their thick red bases gave a pop of colour to the sea of greenery. Black carpenter bees flew from flower to flower as they left trails of buzzing sounds in their pursuit of pollen. From the boardwalk, I spotted a rare sight of a family of otters swimming along the shores of the lake, with their heads bobbing up and down in the lake as they hunted for their next prey.

During my time there, I found that the serene ambience of the park was often disturbed by the sounds of thudding and metal clanging. There, at the opposite side of the park were the ominous sights of bulldozers and excavators, clawing at the remaining pieces of natural soil. Unlike the lush greenery that allured visitors by its bewitching beauty, the sight of the construction site stood out

like a sore thumb, with the natural biodiversity there being reduced to mere soil and debris. The brown and barren land stretched across the park, a wasteland just waiting to be turned into the next Garden of Eden.

Jurong Lake Gardens was redeveloped as part of the Singapore Government's Tourism Redevelopment Plans, with redevelopment plans still ongoing as the park is gradually opened to the public. Given the extensive reconstruction being done to appeal to the aesthetics of the community, the park has found new visitors stepping through its entrances with each opening. The abundance of wildlife scattered across the park led me to wonder whether the processes involved in landscaping had a part to play in their abundance. The prioritisation of our own needs to make parks accessible and attractive to our communities may have contributed to the displacement of these animals from their homes, forcing them to adapt to ever-changing, artificial landscapes where they are squeezed into densely populated spaces. This disregards the needs of other species who have an equal say as to how their habitats are being repurposed, which brings me to my question: How can the Singapore government manage between landscaping and environmental conservation?

Festus (2014) perceives landscaping as being essential to the environmental conservation of undeveloped spaces. Landscaping is defined as a process that involves “accentuation, conservation, destruction or alteration of environmental components” to produce artificial landscapes that fulfil the needs of the community (p.146). However, one cannot ignore the negative impacts that are incurred to beautify natural spaces. These impacts include subjecting undeveloped land to deforestation which can contribute towards deteriorating land, water and air quality. Festus however, argues that the positive impacts of landscaping far outweigh the negative impacts, where landscaping aids in dampening the ramifications of natural disasters and involves processes that can facilitate the recovery of undeveloped spaces. To offset the negative impacts caused by landscaping, Festus proposes the integration of resource management systems which aid in the replacement of environmental resources such that there are sufficient resources for future generations. Additionally, the use of landscaping coupled with renewable technologies can contribute towards the sustainability of undeveloped spaces as they play significant roles in addressing the effects of climate change.

While the methods proposed by Festus (2014) point towards building sustainable landscapes, they revolve around addressing the needs of men and lack careful consideration of the impacts that are inflicted onto the environment. The methods are effective in addressing how landscapes can be used sustainably only after landscaping has been carried out and does not address the damages that are incurred due to the modification of environmental

elements, nor can they aid in minimising these damages. Therefore, although the methods proposed by Festus are effective solutions that can be adopted by the Singapore government to address the issue of managing between landscaping and environmental conservation, the lack of consideration on how landscaping affects the natural biodiversity renders these methods as being insufficient in ensuring the holistic environmental conservation of undeveloped spaces.

In contrast, Leitao and Ahern (2002) propose methods that integrate sustainability into every aspect of landscaping. They emphasise on the importance of careful evaluation of the proposed landscape solutions and encourage planners to integrate sustainability into every step of landscape planning instead of reserving it as an afterthought. They suggest that a key criterion in building sustainable landscapes begins with the establishment of the relationship between the natural elements of an environment and the processes that occur. This can help in identifying the function of a piece of land and facilitate the prediction and evaluation of the ecological consequences that may arise from the proposed landscape solutions. Planners can opt to use landscape metrics which provide comprehensive description on the spatial structure of undeveloped spaces together with quantitative methods that are used to quantify the data collected. The use of the proposed methods can aid in providing insight on the undeveloped land and encourages the creation of landscaping solutions that consider the environmental health of the land. The benefits reaped using a combination of the proposed methods can contribute extensively in “[describing]

landscapes and plans and [supporting] a more quantitative approach" towards obtaining new perspectives on the proposed solutions (p.75).

Despite the promising and effective solutions proposed by Leitao and Ahern (2002), the solutions have yet to be adopted by architects and remain unpopular within the field of architecture. This can be attributed to the issues surrounding the complexity of the metrics and the confusion of what metrics are suited towards evaluating different aspects of landscape planning. Overall, the proposed methods are efficient in providing a framework that can guide government agencies in integrating sustainability into every aspect of landscaping which can aid in propelling the Singapore government in building landscapes that are appealing to Singaporeans yet sustainable in the long run. However, the low usability of the methods does raise doubts on the effectiveness of these solutions despite the theoretical advantages that can be reaped through the methods proposed. Nonetheless, the government must be receptive towards experimenting with new ideas that bear considerable potential and take calculated risks in order to make significant progress in addressing the issues surrounding sustainable development in landscaping.

While the proposed methods by Festus (2014), Leitao and Ahern (2002) both address the issues surrounding sustainable landscapes, it is worth noting the differences in how sustainability is approached by different planners. Festus' stance on sustainability is focused on how landscapes can be used to contribute towards the overall improvement of environmental health after

landscaping works have been completed. Leitao and Ahern on the other hand adopt a proactive approach in ensuring sustainability, where they actively consider the ecological consequences of the proposed landscape solutions and attempt to mitigate such consequences. The differences surrounding the understanding of sustainability has a profound influence in the methods that are proposed by different planners. Antrop (2006) discusses the differences in understanding the definition of sustainability within the realm of landscaping using two broad definitions. Sustainability can be defined as the "conservation of certain landscape [elements] and the continuation of practices that maintain and organise these landscapes" (p.187). Conversely, sustainability can also be described as "the [ability of a particular landscape] to enhance the sustainability" of a piece of land (p.187). Based on these definitions, we can draw connections as to how the definition of sustainability has influenced the methods proposed. Leitao and Ahern's beliefs relate to the first definition, whereas Festus agrees with the latter. Therefore, the burden of building sustainable landscapes relies just as heavily on the beliefs of architects towards sustainability as their beliefs play a significant role in influencing the methods that are adopted in landscape planning. This further highlights the importance of architects in the journey towards sustainability as they bear great responsibilities in moulding future landscapes through the decisions that they make which are heavily influenced by their beliefs surrounding sustainability.

Overall, the ecological methods proposed can be adopted by the Singapore government to effectively

promote sustainable landscaping. These methods aid in evaluating the consequences of proposed landscape solutions and integrate existing frameworks that further enhance the sustainability of landscapes. Additionally, the understanding and beliefs surrounding the idea of sustainability among architects are also essential in producing sustainable landscapes as architects play significant roles in the decision-making process of landscaping. Hence, a consensus on how sustainability is defined within the landscaping field is necessary to ensure that the methods adopted by planners are aligned with the sustainability goals defined by the government.

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CC0001

Impact of Second Language Acquisition on Our Way of Thinking

Yang Xiaoyue

Scrolling down the notes I had done, immediately I noticed the layout of the page. Texts were divided into multilevel and highlighted in different colours for categorisation. When practicing personal writing in English, my mind would keep asking myself: "How can my idea be presented in the most logical sense?" As the question echoed in my head, I placed my hands on the keyboard and repeated the question in whispers. The page remained blank until the sentence could express a complete concept with subject-verb-object structure. Writing in my native language, Chinese, however, I paid less attention to the structure of the sentence but more focused on the overall meaning. My idea flowed relatively smoothly compared to when writing in English. For example, when writing the phrase "不尝苦中苦，不知甜中甜", the word-by-word translation from Chinese to English would be "Do not taste the bitterness inside the bitterness, do not know the sweetness in the sweetness." In Chinese, the relationship between sentences does not rely on conjunctions or tenses. It relies more on the consistency of the meaning throughout the context. On the contrary, a more appropriate translation to English would be "If you have not tasted the bitterness of gall, you will not know the sweetness of honey." It is clear to see that conjunctions and

tenses are needed to convey the same idea in English. The sentence is required to have subject, verb, and object to be complete. Therefore, observing my writing habits in English, I expected myself to check the logic of each sentence before I wrote. When doing so, I found myself approaching a problem more rigorously. The causes and effects had to be stated clearly, and the sentence had to be logically complete. Whereas, when writing in Chinese, I focused more on the idea itself as the language did not require me to write in a logic-oriented way as English did. The difference left me wondering: How does learning a second language help us develop new ideas?

The article, *Bilingual people may make different choices based on the language they're thinking in. Here's why.* written by Galadriel Watson (2020), states the possibility that people tend to make different decisions when speaking in their first and second language. When speaking in a native language, people show more of their sensibilities. Contrarily, they are more like thinkers than perceivers when speaking in second languages. Watson's statement is supported by an associate professor, Sayuri Hayakawa's study as it discovers that among a group of undergraduate students,

their sense of morality diminished when being asked in their foreign language about a moral dilemma. "Using a foreign language just doesn't have the same kind of emotional resonance that your native tongue does," according to Hayakwawa (as cited in Watson, 2020). In another study done by Catherine Caldwell-Harris, an associate professor (as cited in Watson, 2020), the result shows that teenagers at school are less considerate about their use of taboo words when speaking in a second language.

Watson's (2020) article shows an insight into how learning a second language affects teenagers' way of thinking. Watson claims that the emotional response is less shown in their second language. The conclusion shows that the effect can go in both a positive and a negative way. Thinking in a foreign language can help you see things more objectively and logically. Hence an effective and profit-maximized decision can be made. However, separation from emotions can also lead to a lower level of empathy response when communicating with others. The reason why they tend to choose a utility-maximizing option when being asked in a foreign language could be that they are busy thinking about the question in their foreign language. There is no room for emotional factors to interfere in the decision-making process. Therefore, during this process, emotions are not shared between the two languages. Studies cited in the article seem to assume that students who participated in the study learnt their second language at a later stage of life. They leave out the possibility that some of them might be born and raised in a bilingual environment. In this perspective, the article appears one-sided. Since

both languages are their mother tongues, their way of thinking in these languages should be similar, according to Watson.

The TED Talk, *How language shapes the way we think*, presented by a cognitive scientist, Lera Boroditsky (2017), shows that language affects how we think in many ways. According to Boroditsky, "Human minds have invented not one cognitive universe, but 7,000." The author introduces several examples from her studies to show that our views on space, quantities, colours, grammatical gender, and causality differ because of language. Different languages describe things with different emphasis and different levels of accuracy.

Boroditsky (2017) illustrates how speaking in different languages can result in different thinking modes due to the diversity in vocabulary and structural habits. It indirectly proves that when we learn a second language, we are learning another way of thinking. The focus of the sentence can change and some information that one language emphasizes might be redundant when express in another language, but at the same time, we also gain another point of emphasis. In such a way, we can view things from a brand new perspective. However, participants of the study may have different professions and environments that may have also resulted in the way they think. In other words, these factors could also contribute to the outcome of the experiments. Considering the experiments cannot be defined strictly as controlled experiments, the result may be a combination of many factors including language differences. Therefore, it would be more accurate to say that "language influences our way of thinking" rather

than “shapes.”

Both Watson (2020) and Boroditsky (2017) agree on the statement that language contributes to how we think. Watson focuses on the psychological impact as well as the impact on the decision-making process, whereas Boroditsky emphasizes the difference in human expressions as a result of using different languages.

We think differently in our first and second language in the way that we can step outside of the picture and develop a fresh understanding of things that we thought we fully understood. When I wrote in Chinese, I often encountered situations when the idea of the sentence was not clear until I had a full understanding of the whole context. Sentences were interconnected, and the main point was to let the readers grasp the idea themselves. If I expressed the same thought in English, a language that emphasized its logical structure, it was clearer and simpler to see what point I was trying to make. In this way, I was thinking more analytically. It allowed me to stand in a new perspective to view the same problem.

The wonder of language is that it is more than a tool we use to communicate but is also the carrier of diverse cultures. We, as language learners, are able to appreciate cultural differences and bring in new viewpoints from other languages. It explains how I can think differently by writing in two different languages. Learning a second language constructs new perspectives for us, deepening our understanding of the world.

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Academic Writing: A Torture Worth Enduring?

Jain Kriti

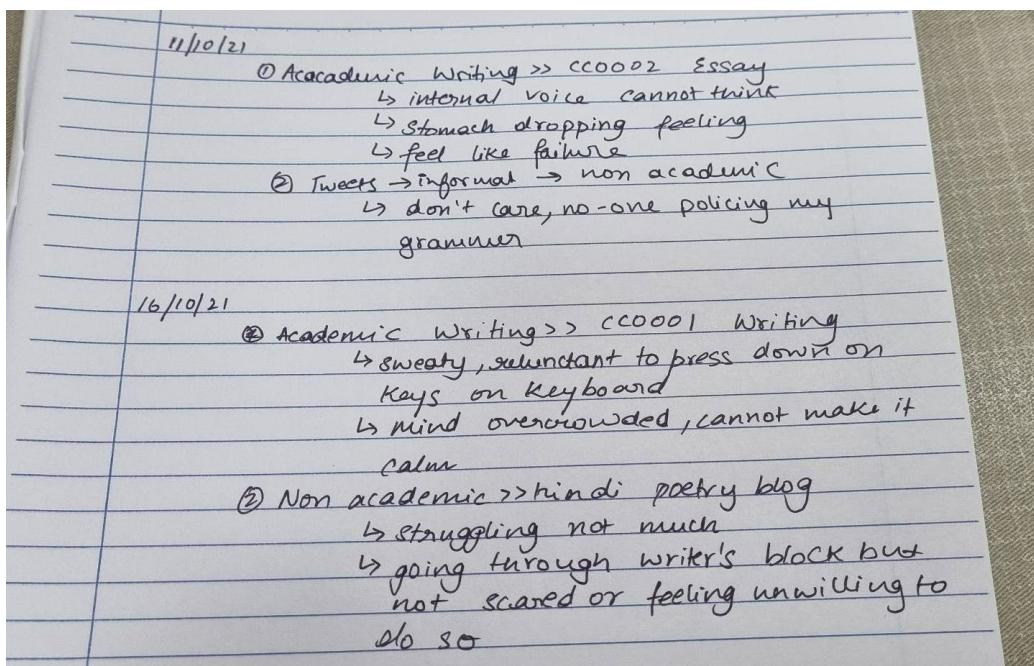


Figure 1. Notes taken during that week about the different kinds of writing undertaken. It is quite clear from above that academic writing boosted my anxiety while non-academic writing has no prevalent effect of my anxiety.

"A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people"¹⁸

-Thomas Mann, German Novelist

The words above may present themselves as a logical fallacy to my dear reader but in reality, they reflect the true anguish felt by me composing this very piece. It all begins with a focus on data

collection, ie, a rigorous self-interrogation process of my writing practices ranging from informal texts and tweets sent absentmindedly to the laser-focused blog posts and emails drafted for my online

¹⁸ Moser, B., & Stevens, D. (2015, January 27). *Is Being a Writer a Job or a Calling?* The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/01/books/review/is-being-a-writer-a-job-or-a-calling.html>

audience. This trial-like process pokes at every nook and cranny of my already thin cloth-like sense of identity until a flood of questions pours out along the lines: Am I doing the right thing? Who deemed me qualified enough to write about this topic? Is my idea good enough? Does what I have to say matter? Am I pretending to be someone or something I am not? Who am I? While drowning in this flood of questions I look for an anchor around me to ground myself back to reality by feeling the simple features of a studded pen or turning up my music to unhealthy volume. The end of the research phase then marks the dawn of the writing phase. Thought that sea of self-doubt would make the second phase easier dear reader? I flop down in front of my laptop like a sack of potatoes fiddling with specific keys afraid to mark the pristine white screen, rubbing my face to no effect, waiting for either adrenaline or panic to kick in. After somehow stumbling through a messy first draft of characters and words haphazardly strung together to signify a unified purpose it comes time to plunge into the depths of mistakes, self-regret and shame headfirst: the editing process. By now it is too late to pull the plug on this process because I am emotionally invested in this. Is this writing anguish worth it? Why is it that my insecurities shape my writing mindset in such a taxing manner? Where do writing insecurities of student writers like myself stem from and how do they affect our writing mindset?

In hopes of remedying my onion-like anxiety and to answer this question which is the root cause of issues like procrastination, low self-confidence, and unproductivity amongst student writers, I decided to consider the arguments presented by Cheryl Hogue

Smith and Nicoletta Demetriou on this topic.

An analysis conducted by Cheryl Hogue Smith (2010) in the research article *Diving in Deeper: Bringing Basic writer's thinking to the surface* proposed that student writer's insecurities stemmed from a combination of two factors: lack of cultural literacy and learning attitude orientations.

Smith (2010) suggests that our cultural literacy relies on our experiences or skill of abstraction which in turn affects our self-perception. She presents it via the following riddle:

"A scuba diver drowns in 125 ft of water with an air tank still half filled with air. Why does he drown?"

Experienced scuba divers would be able to point out with very little need for abstraction that in this scenario the scuba diver became infused with nitrogen, causing them to feel drunk and make the mistake of removing the air-mask and hence drowned. On the other hand, inexperienced divers would need to employ higher-level thinking to make up for their inexperience to abstract potential investigations to determine cause of death such as a coroner's report. However, this may not be the case. Inexperienced scuba divers may instead engage in inferior levels of thinking of shark attacks or malfunctioning air tanks. In this riddle, we as the audience are often unable to distinguish between gaps in the provided context and our own knowledge which leads to feelings of frustration whilst struggling to transition from the reading to interpreting phase. These struggles and feelings of frustration are synonymous to the writing process of student writers which cultivates a notion of

deficiency in themselves rather than viewing it as a step in the learning process. Smith (2010) argues that this notion is made worse or better based on learning attitudes of student writers.

Smith (2010) presents a dichotomy of learning attitudes in which all student writer fall in: performance goal or learning goal orientation. Students with learning goals view errors as useful and natural, teachers as a resource and have intrinsic motivation in writing which can help them overcome this notion of deficiency. In contrast, students with performance goals view errors as failures, teachers as jury, judge and executioner and have extrinsic motivation in writing which can accentuate this feeling of deficiency in themselves.

Based on Smith's (1020) findings it would be fair to conclude intrinsic, attitudinal factors such as learning attitudes and cultural literacy prevent student writer's from streamlining their thinking in a constructive manner, thus leading to writing insecurities.

Alternatively, Nicoletta Demetriou (2015) in her Ted talk offers that a student writer's insecurities are birthed from our monkey-mind, unawareness of inner voice and the vice of expectation.

On average, the human mind jumps between 6,200¹⁹ thoughts per day which we may not always

hear but are ever present. The Buddhists likened this incessant movement of thoughts to the movement of a monkey constantly leaping from one branch to another in a never-ending loop²⁰. These thoughts are often louder than our own inner voice, suppressing it.



Figure 1.2. Monkey leaping from one branch to another likewise our minds process roughly 6200 thoughts per day

Writing transforms our minds, which resembles a big noisy highway into an empty rural street so that our own inner voice can shine through. This can be intimidating for student writers as finding their inner voice may come at a steep price of finding some bitter inner truths. Am I in the right major? Do I really want that research position? Do I like dogs better than cats? This sudden vulnerability can act as a turnoff for many student writers, deterring them away from writing.

In addition to not knowing one's inner voice Demetriou (2015) also blames writing insecurities on the vice of expectation intertwined with this field. Demetriou mentions when people are asked "Can writing change lives?" the most common response

¹⁹ News18. (2020, July 19). *Humans Have Around 6,200 Thoughts in a Single Day, Shows New Study.* <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/humans-have-around-6200-thoughts-in-a-single-day-shows-new-study-2723281.html>

²⁰ Raab, D. (2017, September 13). *Calming the Monkey Mind Do you have an inner voice that hinders your success?* Psychologytoday. Retrieved December 9, 2021, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com.sg/blog/the-empowerment-diary/201709/calming-the-monkey-mind>

she gets is "I don't write." However, the question she posed isn't whether they could author the next great novel or win the Pulitzer Prize, it was about writing: the simplistic task of committing pen to paper. There seems to be an inherent assumption in writing which doesn't exist in other fields such as cooking. If one were asked "Do you cook?" no one would assume that the question implied "Have you won a Michelin star for your cooking?" By contrast in writing people seem to assume that in order to write they should have won an award for their writing or gained formal recognition for it.

According to Demetriou (2015), expectation of miraculous writing and not knowing your inner voice act as a trigger for writing insecurities in student writers, deterring students away from writing.

While Demetriou (2015) attributed writing insecurities of student writer's to environmental and internal factors, Smith (2010) argued that writing insecurities are purely due to attitudinal factors such as lack of cultural literacy and learning attitude orientation. However, one similarity between both Smith and Demetriou is that both believe writing insecurities can have a negative impact on one's self-perception be it fear or frustration.

Hence returning to the original question: Where do writing insecurities of student writers like myself stem from and how do they affect our writing mindset? Considering the various concepts introduced from both sources I conclude that writing insecurities may stem from a mix of attitudinal and environmental factors in student writers which might lead to feelings of anxiety, fear,

and frustration as they are unable to streamline their thoughts on paper. However, knowing a student writer's inner voice no matter how intimidating it is may help to alleviate their insecurities of writing, be it academic or non-academic contexts. One way to achieve this is to practice welfare writing, where for 15 minutes of the day students disconnect from everything around them and write without thinking or editing to declutter their mind and to get in touch with their inner voice.

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I am extremely grateful to my tutor, Ms. Esther, my classmates, and my parents as without them this project would have not been possible. Ms. Esther provided me with continuous encouragement and her patience gave me the courage to pursue this overwhelming and complex topic from the ideation through to the execution phases. Without her valuable guidance, I would have abandoned this topic long time ago. My classmates' valuable insights and countless ideas inspired me to tackle this topic from an array of perspectives besides my own allowing me to realize the universality of this problem among student writers. I would also like to thank my senior Venkatraman Natarajan Iyer for providing me with numerous suggestions which helped to refine this text further.

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CC0001

The Plant-demic: Indoor Horticulture and its Influence on Mental Wellbeing

Amirul Sufyan Bin Mohamed Salleh

I was only able to view Mr. Shaun Shyen's balcony garden through a constricted six-inch display of my phone. Yet, the 18-second video he posted on TikTok aptly captured its tranquil ambience. The video, accompanied by a mellifluous background music, begins by presenting thin stems that carry variegated leaves with scalloped edges crawling down onto rows of smooth ceramic pots that various sturdy plants are rooted in. Coming into frame as the camera pans across Mr. Shyen's transformed balcony is a snuggly-looking couch that sits in the middle where one could be comforted by the company of majestic leaves that would rustle gently when the warm breeze whistles through the window. In the corner, clouds of gentle mist spiralled upwards from the multiple humidifiers he installed, wafting along a sense of peace that diffuses throughout the balcony. That was the final clip before the video ends and while the background music gradually retreats, the calmness of the garden persisted.

For Mr. Shyen, however, keeping house plants brings more than just tranquillity. Facing retrenchment amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, he found himself in a hapless state and often woke up "to the guilt of not having a job and without any sense of a purpose." However, it is at this profound

stage of his life that he took the opportunity to revamp his balcony and added more plants to his collection. The outcome of this is not only a vibrant botanical paradise but a more contented Mr. Shyen as well. He adds, "I think intrinsically, one of the joys of working is to see growth in what we do. It can be in the form of targeted sales being met, (turning) an angry customer ... satisfied or helping out a colleague who is going through a rough patch. Seeing growth in a plant you are nurturing has pretty much that similar effect."

Now that Mr. Shyen has found a job, his garden provides him with solace whenever he needs a break from his intense workload. Like Mr. Shyen, I have seen many others (Lee, 2020) including my friends who became indoor plant caregivers during the pandemic. What I found to be intriguing was that most of them would agree that they felt more fulfilled and less distressed than before; they are in a healthier psychological state. Looking at these transformations then raises a question: Why does indoor horticulture positively influence mental wellbeing?

According to a study conducted by Dzambov et al. (2021), a person's mental health state can be enhanced by the viewing of greenery. Working on

laborious and time-consuming tasks requires sustained voluntary attention (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982 as cited in Dzambov et al., 2021). However, when this type of attention is prolonged, it drains our cognitive resources such as working memory and problem-solving skills, thereby impeding our productivity. The persistent inability to complete urgent tasks can then induce anxiety and feelings of remorse which take a toll on our mental health. Dzambov et al. presented empirical data that the viewing of greenery combats this problem through the concept of “being away.” As plants are inherently interesting, viewing them requires no effort, allowing a person to be present in the moment and “be away” from demanding everyday routines. This allots a period of recovery which replenishes a person’s attention reserves and depleted cognitive resources. Consequently, it effectuates an improved mental health state denoted by the reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety in the study.

The findings from Dzambov et al.’s (2021) study is undoubtedly applicable to the current Singaporean work-centric society. For many corporate workers, returning to their homes provides a form of mental respite and “being away” from their workload and job routines. Given the current climate of unpredictability that the Covid-19 pandemic generated, working from home becomes a default arrangement for many corporations. Homes then can no longer serve as a form of mental respite when demanding workload intrudes these safe spaces. Hence, it is no surprise that people working from home reported higher levels of anxiety and stress (Rajah, 2020). Dzambov et al. reveals how keeping indoor plants can mitigate the harmful psychological effects of working from home. The

versatility of small potted indoor plants means that they can be placed in proximity to work desks, providing an accessible form of “being away.” However, keeping indoor plants is not merely a matter of possessing one, these plants require specific needs to attend to as well. Would the burden of nurturing these plants then add on to our daily stresses and negatively impact our mental health?

Adevi and Mårtensson (2013) diverge from this view and instead note that the act of gardening can foster better mental health conditions by enhancing an individual’s self-esteem. In the study, responses from participants of horticultural therapy were recorded. One of the participants expressed that “it was a really bad feeling not to be needed and to know that I will never be able to come back (to work). Nobody wants me. I’m over fifty and burned out! Here I was needed. The plants needed me, they needed water, they needed to be planted.” This suggests that when plant caregivers are able to witness how their own effort allows these plants to thrive, it reinforces the self-belief of their own capabilities and generates a sense of fulfilment—both of which are integral to a healthy self-esteem. Indeed, a better view of oneself ultimately leads to an improved mental health state.

Adevi and Mårtensson (2013) provides us a greater understanding of why many (Lee, 2020) especially those who experienced retrenchment, including Mr. Shyen, chose to turn to nurturing indoor plants to cope with the pandemic. Many of us tend to tie our self-esteem to the job we do and how much we earn (Gan, 2018). Hence, it is undeniable that retrenchment can be disastrous for mental health as it undermines the confidence in our competence

and skills. Nurturing indoor plants provide an alternative way to validate our abilities and a steppingstone to mend our self-esteem. If we can observe how our indoor plants are able to flourish as a result of our own actions, then it is not too far-fetched to perceive that we are capable of succeeding in other areas including finding other career opportunities. This restoration of self-esteem through the act of nurturing plants positively influences mental wellbeing especially during a challenging time like retrenchment.

Though I concur with Adevi and Mårtensson (2013) that nurturing indoor plants can improve a person's self-esteem by reinforcing their confidence in their capabilities, there are other reasons to believe why indoor plants can positively influence mental wellbeing. Reflecting and finding meaning within the processes of nature can allow us to gain clarity of the issues we encounter in our lives. This can help us put our problems into perspective and reduce its impact on our mental health. Furthermore, by pondering on the processes of nature, we are also diverted from any current stressors, acquiring the benefits of "being away" as endorsed by Dzambov et al. (2021). Besides, when Mr. Shyen reflected and compared the growth of his plants with his experience during employment, he was able to understand that a sense of progress is needed for him to feel good about himself, touching on the concept related to self-esteem brought by Adevi and Mårtensson.

While the worst of the pandemic may be behind us, its detrimental effect on our psychological wellbeing is enduring and extensive ("WHO warns of 'long-term' Covid-19 impact on mental health", 2021),

highlighting a compelling need to mitigate this mental health crisis. Indoor plants may not directly resolve our problems, but they can provide an accessible form of catharsis to Singapore's ever increasing stressful lifestyle. Whereas drastic lifestyle changes may be too big of a step to alleviate this crisis, nurturing indoor plants can be an appropriate initial approach towards improving individual mental health. Moreover, what else would we imagine paradise to be—a place that would be free of stress—if not in the presence of plants and nature. Would it not be better if we could bring that into the comfort of our homes?

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CC0001

How Do We in Singapore Look Beyond the Stigma of Ex-Offenders?

Pamela Lee (Li Mingfang)

When I first walked into Popo's house, it was warm and cosy—nothing like I had expected. There was a dollhouse and a bunch of other toys lying in the corner of his living room. Pictures of his family were plastered all over the walls. It was hard to believe that barely a year ago, his house had been raided for drugs by the Central Narcotics Bureau.

Popo, an ex-offender, was now out under a Conditional Remission Order.

I was slightly intimidated by Popo at first. His large stature, heavily tattooed arms and legs made him out to be the stereotypical lawbreaker you see in the movies. His earlobes had big holes and when he came into the light, you could see the holes in his face where his piercings once were. The atmosphere in the room was slightly awkward as we made small talk. There was a bulky black "watch" strapped onto his left ankle—he referred to that as his "Rolex" and laughed it off, breaking the ice, before telling me that it was actually a device used by the police to ensure that he abides by his curfew.

As I walked into his room, he gestured for me to take a seat and asked if I wanted anything to drink. His room smelled like the designated smoking area of a hawker centre. "Sorry, I need to smoke, do you

mind?" After I told him I was fine with it, he lit up his cigarette and started smoking. With each puff, he consciously tried to blow the smoke away from my direction.

Although subtle, his actions here stuck with me. Despite having the stereotypical physical attributes of an ex-convict, he was mild-mannered and polite. There was a sharp contrast between the way he looked and the way he carried himself. Strip off his piercings, tattoos and the black tagging device on his ankle, you would never have guessed that he was an ex-offender. There was a sense of normalcy about him despite his status in society as an ex-convict.

This brings in the idea that there's more to a person than what we see on the surface. Often, we let the stereotypes we have of people define the way we see them. We fall prey to our preconceived notions and we categorise all ex-offenders into the same box because it fits our perception of who we think they are, not who they actually are.

This ultimately begs the question—how do we in Singapore look beyond the stigma of ex-offenders? Lopez et al. (2020) argued that media portrayal of ex-offenders in Singapore plays a big part in shaping the way society views them. The media

displays a consistent pattern of ex-offenders—they are either shown to have benefitted from existing prison programs or are framed as helpless individuals. Frequent usage of the words “help” and “give” in the media communicates and places emphasis on the idea that all ex-convicts need help. As they continue to frame ex-offenders under these labels, it creates a psychosocial barrier between the ex-convicts and society as it points to a power difference between the community and the ex-offenders. As a result, there is a clear distinction of a “one-way beneficiary-benefactor relationship” between them (p.37). An insight into the situation from them states that “the frequent perpetuation of ideas that ex-offenders need to “be accepted” creates a dialectical tension with the concurrent motive of destigmatising” (p.39). Thanks to the media, ex-offenders are confined to a box and there is limited representation of them. An accurate portrayal of ex-convicts would require, “the communication of the person and not what the person has to do, has done or needs.” (p.40)

Lopez et al. (2020) suggest that looking beyond the stigma of ex-offenders in Singapore starts from changing the way our mainstream media frames them. The media is a powerful tool that can shape the way people think. So, by portraying them in a negative light, the media iterates the existing stigma of the ex-offenders, making it harder for society to look past this stigma. Despite the validity of this argument, it is worth noting that Lopez et al. placed more emphasis on the portrayal of ex-offenders in traditional media, rather than new media. This could result in a slightly skewed perspective of how ex-offenders are being painted as social media platforms are known for having a

variety of perspectives and hence they might be shown in a better light on those platforms.

On the other hand, with many job applications requiring applicants to declare any criminal offences that they have done in the past, upon conviction, these ex-offenders are slapped with the stigmatising label of being a “criminal offender.” Morre et al. (2016) claimed that the discrimination faced by the ex-offenders from the public “presents a significant level of stigmatisation that has the potential to impact the self.” (p.3). This refers to the internalised stigma the ex-offenders have—that is the innate belief that they possess negative stereotyped qualities. This mindset of theirs leads them to expect future discrimination from others. According to the study conducted, these beliefs that ex-convicts have might develop into a variety of mental health problems which includes strong feelings of hopelessness, low self-esteem or general distress. Moreover, since internalised stigma is linked to stereotype-consistent behaviour, ex-offenders might withdraw themselves from the community or display maladaptive behaviours. As a result, it makes it harder for these ex-convicts to turn over a new leaf and become law-abiding citizens.

For society to look past the stigma of ex-offenders, Morre et al. (2016) suggest that it would require them to overcome their internalised stigma. This is because their internalised stigma causes them to perceive themselves as less than others, leading them to withdraw themselves from society. Hence, there is a lack of interaction and understanding between the community and the ex-offenders, and thus ex-convicts are judged at face value. However,

it is important to keep in mind that Morre et al. did not take into consideration the criminal history of the ex-offenders. Offenders who committed a more severe crime might face more discrimination from society and since discrimination manifests in the form of internalised stigma, severe criminal offenders might have more internalised stigma that might be harder for them to overcome.

Both sides acknowledge the negative stigma surrounding ex-offenders. However, ideas on how the stigma of these ex-offenders is iterated in society differ. For Lopez et al. (2020) they argue that media framing of ex-offenders has a part to play in contributing to the perceived stigma of ex-convicts whereas for Morre et al. (2016) they suggest that the internalised stigma of the ex-offenders discourages them to interact with society thus the public only knows them by their stereotypes, contributing to the stigma surrounding them.

Therefore, I believe that both the media portrayal and the internalised stigma of the ex-convicts have a part to play in creating a divide between society and the ex-offenders, and it is this gap that makes it difficult for society to look beyond the stigma of ex-offenders. Due to the media portrayal of the ex-convicts, people are consuming content that tells them that ex-offenders are people who need their help. Hence, some might have a saviour mentality - that they are here to help and "save" these ex-offenders by accepting them. However, this is the exact mindset that pushes the divide between the community and the ex-offenders as it further perpetuates the assumptions that society already has about them. Since internalised stigma comes from the belief that they are what people say they

are, this further contributes to their internalised stigma, leading them to withdraw themselves from the public, making the social divide even bigger.

In conclusion, for society to look beyond the stigma of ex-offenders, encouragement and support is needed for them to step out and reach out to society. Tying it back to my observational data analysis, I believe that bridging the divide would allow for us to better understand ex-offenders like Popo, thus allowing us to look past our preconceived notions that are formed solely based on what we see on the surface. Only then will we be able to progress forward as an inclusive society where ex-offenders are accepted for who they are as a person.

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CC0001

Why Does the Hidden State of Homelessness Persist in Singapore?

Phoebe Hoon Wei Ting



Figure 1. One of the makeshift homes by Harbourfront Uncles

Often hidden away from the general public, they are not a common sight seen on the streets. They are the homeless community in Singapore. Under the Destitute Person Act ("DPA"), a homeless person is recognised as destitute: he is a nuisance or has no place of residence in public places. This definition reinforces the stereotype of homelessness as beggars or even dangerous, which permits authorities to admit them into welfare homes, driving them deeper into concealed spaces far away

from the public eye like under the overhead bridge at Harbourfront. Whenever the volunteers drop by the bridge for our weekly affair, we are always welcomed with open arms by the Harbourfront uncles. They are a bubbly group of uncles who prefer sleeping together at Harbourfront differently from other uncles residing in heartland neighbourhoods who prefer sleeping alone.

I vividly remember my first meeting with the Harbourfront uncles. Entering their living area, a stench of sweat and grime rushes up my nostril and tears up my eyes. And when my eyes finally made clear of my surroundings, I saw rows of makeshift homes that draw similarities to the "attap" houses found in local rural villages once known as "kampung." Playing around with the resources available to them, the uncles put together a home with materials like cardboard, blue tarps or even advertisement posters. Not only that, but the cardboards, public benches and "Kopitiam" chairs also act as their makeshift beds (as shown in Figure 1.). Since cardboards are core materials for their home, this poses a challenge for them during rainy weather as they struggle to keep their home intact and avoid being drenched by the storm.

I first met Uncle Ali (pseudonym) at the skirt of the overhead bridge. He spoke fondly of his adolescent

memories living in the "kampung," but gradually our conversation settled on his homelessness. His eyes darted back and forth when he mentioned his divorce describing, "...what can uncle do? Cannot don't give." After his divorce, he left ownership of their matrimonial home to his wife despite racking up a huge legal bill from the divorce. He then found himself struggling to settle between odd jobs like cleaners and security guards. "Uncle's children are all big now ... they have [their own family]," revealing that his children's hand are financially tied and could not provide much to support him. When prompted about social services, he pointed out that he has sought help from social agencies, but could only be eligible for short-term ComCare assistance. With scarce resources at hand, he eventually ran out of borrowed help and was forced to fend for himself on the streets.

Despite stereotypes about the homeless, it is difficult to distinguish the uncles from the general public as they do not fit into the stereotypes. I have also never once felt unsafe or unwelcome when I was around them. Speaking to the other Harbourfront uncles, I noticed that a handful of them shared similar plights with Uncle Ali. They all had their support ecosystem collapsed on them, mixed with occasional bad life decisions that led to their homelessness. Given the group size of the Harbourfront Uncles, one would think that their group's existence would have gained some media traction. Yet, the existence of homelessness in Singapore still remains generally ambiguous among the general public. Their predicament leads one to wonder about the state of homelessness in the face of a global city. Why does the hidden state of homelessness persist in Singapore?

Media plays a fundamental role in relaying information to the public. According to an ethnographic study of 26 homeless people conducted by Tan and Forbes-Mewett (2017) in their article, *Whose 'fault' is it? Becoming homeless in Singapore*, they examine the Singapore's media landscape where censorship laws regulate content on local media like homelessness coverage through Media Development Authority of Singapore. The study employed thematic analysis to analyse policy documents and government speech on homelessness including newspaper articles dating back to the 19th century to 2016. They observe that the government releases their statement whenever a local media publishes any homelessness news. These statements focus on the number of the homeless population they have supported and gloss over the increased visibility of older people rough sleeping (p.3584). Likewise, the news coverage portrays the older people as responsible for their descent into homelessness or only rough sleeping for pragmatic reasons, for example, saving on transport costs to commute to work (p.3585). Thus, showing how the government and local media describe homelessness to the public.

Tan and Forbes-Mewett (2017) provide us insight towards the strict regulation of information dissemination on homelessness in the public sphere. I agree with their observation that local media underrepresent the magnitude and experience of homelessness. Such selective framing of homelessness only highlights digestible content of homelessness for public consumption by drawing attention to the homeless as a matter of

choice over the growing scale of homelessness. Moreover, the media plays a central source of information to engage the public in civic discussion, and the lack thereof contributes to the “out of sight, out of mind” mentality, whereby the underrepresentation renders the homeless invisible precluding them from participation in civic discussion. It is worth noting that the usage of thematic analysis has its limitation as it allows flexibility in interpretation. This approach means that the flexibility will prioritise identification of theme over consistency and coherence of data research (Holloway & Todres, 2003). However, said observation is still relevant in understanding the power of media representation over the hidden state of homelessness.

Another possible factor that contributed to the hidden state of homelessness, which we may consider is a sociological study conducted by Professor Ng Kok Hoe (2019) of the National University Singapore Sociology Department, *Homeless in Singapore: Results from a nationwide street count*. He seeks to understand the homelessness figures in Singapore through a nationwide street count of 1,050 homeless people. Interestingly, he pointed out that the homeless people remain close in the neighbourhood where they formerly stayed and continued being a part of the community, despite their home dislocation. However, he noted the growing usage of defensive architecture in public spaces. For example, the installation of dividers or bars on benches under the void decks or public parks. The effect of such urban design was to deter homeless people from rough sleeping in public spaces and effectively deny them a safe and sheltered place to rest (p.49).

Ng (2019) sheds light on the usage of defensive architecture in the community and how it drives away the homeless to concealed spaces that may be unsafe and harder to enter for the outreach volunteers. Although such urban designs contribute to the nature of hidden homelessness, there seems to be an underlying factor pushing for its implementation. In Straits Time, Justin Ong (2020) reported the usage of defensive architecture based on Ng’s (2019) findings. He pointed out that “[T]own councils and MPs approached by The Straits Times said these dividers were installed to deter rough sleeping and loitering, and arose from resident feedback.” In light of this perspective, our current understanding of community ownership is hinged on property ownership over other forms of identity or connectedness to the place. This alludes to the visibility and recognition of homelessness to some groups of the public. It seems that they may have adopted the “out of sight, out of mind” mentality as their actions are deliberately displacing the homeless away from the public eye. This then raises the question—perhaps there exist a root cause responsible for shaping the public’s perspective on homelessness?

Tan and Forbes-Mewett (2017) maintain that the strict regulation of homelessness coverage on local media contributes to hidden homelessness, while Ng (2019) argues that defensive architecture as a contributor to hidden homelessness. Although both authors holds distinct viewpoints, they both derive from similar source, namely that they are both top-down forces that exacerbate hidden state of homelessness. Both the media and architecture belongs to an agency that is affiliated with the

government and this makes it harder to alter the narrative of hidden homelessness because of censorship laws (Tan and Forbes-Mewett, 2017, p.3584) or the need to accommodate to public dissent (Ng, 2019, p.49). Granted there is increasing awareness in terms of media, since the release of Ng's study, but awareness can only go so far if structural contributors remain unchallenged (Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, n.d).

As mentioned above, the DPA is a vagrancy law that enforces authorities to admit homeless people into welfare homes. Given its obsolete definition of destitute, the act imposes a stigmatised identity that does not reflect the current experience of homelessness, creating a barrier between law and daily life. We can observe the cascading effects of the stigmatisation trickling down from the lack of media representation leading to public perception of the homeless to rely on the definition ascribed by the law or common stereotypes, which give rise to the appeal for installation of defensive architecture. However, we can begin to unravel the hidden nature of homelessness by shifting away from the obsolete definition of destitute to differentiate between the homeless and destitute. This differentiation provides legal status for the homeless in accessing appropriate social resources with less bureaucracy. While we may not be able to revise the DPA on an individual level, we can engage actively in discussions about the homeless community, which help to increase awareness of homelessness as well as people like Uncle Ali. Hopefully then, when the legislature is ready, we can debunk the "out of sight, out of mind" mentality towards homelessness, and make the homeless visible in the public eye.

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CC0001

A Private Moment in a Public Space

Soh Ji Yin

I move to the back of the bus. I put in my earphones, drowning any lingering thoughts I have and will have in the next empty 30 minutes. I let my brain hum to this endless playlist, and my lips mouth to the lyrics.

The vehicle is comfortable, but not luxurious; it's somehow always either freezing or not cold enough. Commuters are dozing off, consciously avoiding the comfy shoulders of the stranger beside them, or scrolling through their phones absentmindedly. The bell chimes: They board, then they leave. Another boards, and he leaves.

I pick up the familiar scent of new furniture or air freshener; it is something sterile. It is a common aroma in transient places, like hotel lobbies or Ikea. A scent I recognise when present, and forget once gone. It's nostalgic, comforting and somewhat melancholic. The engine is rearing, but is disregarded as white noise to a seasoned commuter like me. Hushed whispers and sporadic ringtones are silenced with haste. Other than that, nothing. There seems to be an unspoken agreement about the sanctity of time and space on this bus, 'you're quiet for me, so I will be quiet for you.'

The sheer banality of the place was what intrigued me the most. A place where seemingly nothing ever happens. My refuge at the end of the day. Yet, it was absolutely enjoyable for me, to watch commuters come and go, and to do nothing but exist.

This bus ride screamed 'mundane.'

Then, a strong scent of cologne mixed with cheap perfume pulls me out of the humdrum of my commute. A pair brushes past, interlocking their fingers with practiced familiarity, as if it were second nature to them. With their desperate attempt at a non-obscene display of physical intimacy in this public space, they simply cannot bear spending a second apart from each other, not on this borrowed time. She's leaning over, her head resting ever so gently on the crevice between his neck and shoulder, her eyes resting softly on her eyelids, her heart resting vulnerably in his hands. He sits stiff as a heavy rock; The duty of being a pleasant headrest, as well as the literal mass of her head, weigh squarely on his shoulder. The bus brakes, she awakes, and this simple, fleeting moment becomes nothing more than a memory to be written over with the passage of time.

Like this bus ride, our lives move along a pre-planned route. However, in a way, many moments in life are transitory. The couple may be in love now, thus overlooking this simple bus ride but if they were to separate then this moment becomes a memory.

To many, these moments are a temporary place, a buffer. Why aren't these simple moments cherished? Why do they always go unnoticed? Everyone is either thinking about the next thing or trying not to. The wheels of progress and modernity on the bus named life never stop turning, and no one takes a beat to notice the things concealed beneath our every step. This moment is but a fragment in our busy, exhilarating lives, it is even a hindrance. I cannot help but wonder if a banal life can be as fulfilling as an exciting one filled with zest.

Why can't this seemingly normal moment be cherished? Why can't mundanity be beautiful?

Hikikomoris are professionals when it comes to mundanity and reclusiveness. I found a video by Sean and Nami (2020) on a specific Hikikomori, (2021) called A Day in the life of a Japanese Hikikomori, and his daily routines. Hikikomori is an acute social withdrawal disorder, where the individual seeks total withdrawal from society, extreme degrees of social isolation and confinement. The term refers to both the phenomenon in general and the recluses themselves. Nito, the Hikikomori, spends his days locked in his apartment, where he consumes frozen food, and leaves his house around once a month to get a haircut. To many, this might seem like a meaningless cycle of life, but not to Nito. Unable to

find a job based on his creative skills, Nito chose not to settle for less. "I wanted to live off my creations no matter what," Nito insisted. He had spent the last ten years in his apartment coding, and learning English, programming his own video game as a living.

Nito's choice may seem dreadful, and an awful waste of time. He leads a bleak life, revolving around routine and the creation of his video game. His lifestyle transcends the mundanity of many nine-to-five office workers, and the extremity of his way of life will probably leave many repulsed and in shock, yet it seems that Nito has captured the essence of "mundanity" to a tee. One essentially feels like their life is an endless meaningless loop, consisting of doing the same activities repeatedly, until it loses all its worth. Listening to Nito's story gave me a sense of emptiness and insecurity. Yet, he persists. An innately human trait, almost as much as prescribing meaning to things. So how does he find beauty in the banal?

Perhaps I'm looking at it all wrong. From my perspective, I see a man cycling through meaningless days. From Nito's perspective, maybe these activities aren't supposed to be special by itself. Each of these moments add up to a larger goal in his life and that is what makes it special for him. Mundanity can be beautiful just by taking it as it is and nothing more, which is banal little human activities that make up our little days. And then for these activities to consequentially make up a large part of our existence thus makes them important. Each seemingly mundane moment plays a part in creating a full life. To look at our lives, rather than in small parts could perhaps alleviate our struggle to

make every little moment exciting. Maybe the key to finding beauty in mundanity is to try to not look for it at all, and just enjoy it for what it is for now.

Moving back 2000 years ago, we have the tale of historical character Epictetus who was a slave in a wealthy household in Hierapolis. Epictetus realised how little control he had over his fate, not only because of his status as a slave, but as a human in general. He is aware of the limitations of mankind and their inability to control many aspects of their life. To that he says "You can bind up my leg,"—indeed, his leg really had been bound and broken—"but not even Zeus has the power to break my freedom of choice." That is your "most efficacious gift," Epictetus said—the power to always control how you respond (Holiday, 2020). In essence, the story of Epictetus shows us that the ingredient of freedom lies within our control regardless of one's conditions.

While this philosophy could be applied to many aspects of our life, I want to focus on how it helps people combat mundanity and feelings of worthlessness. There are bound to be unpredictable events throughout life; Some things will be sacrificed, compromised, or even slip completely out of our control. However, as Epictetus so eloquently put, we can always control how we respond and feel, regardless of the quandary or predicament that we might find ourselves in. Every moment in our life, boring or exciting, is fleeting and limited. When we afford ourselves the ability to cherish and see the beauty within every moment in time, by changing how we perceive the mundane, even the ordinary can become extraordinary.

I've continued to entertain this idea during my regular commutes, and I have fallen in and out of love with this topic. In my opinion, my feelings regarding this topic emulate the phenomenon of life. It is truly easy to fall out of love with living, and many consider relinquishing control to the proverbial bus driver; to simply let him take the wheel, and steer you till you reach your final stop, wherever you may end up at. What's difficult is to continue finding beauty in life, deriving your own excitement and meaning from within. And it's easy to find the joy in doing something extraordinary, like going on a vacation, experiencing new things. But those are exceptions. The fact of the matter remains that we are doing things we have to do, and that's the reality of life.

Can mundanity be beautiful? Of course it can, but not in the way we think. Mundanity has nothing to do with the "commute" itself, and everything to do with our perception of it. Just as the delusively simple act of observing an apple fall out of a tree was the catalyst for Newton's revelation regarding the system of gravitation, this seemingly mundane bus ride has led me down a rabbit hole of introspection and discovery, and resulted in the eventual conception of this op-ed. Once we start living life with intention, and change the way we perceive things, everything changes. It would truly be a shame, for the gift of sentience and an intelligent mind to be squandered by remaining a passenger in your own life. It is time for us to repossess control of the wheel from the bus driver, and enjoy every single moment of our ephemeral time here.

Metaphorically, of course.

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CC0001

Re-Evaluating Procrastination: Can It Be Beneficial?

Valerie Tang Xin Yi

It is late, past 3am. The cicadas sing and the balmy night air is warm against my cheek. Rain soon starts to pour but my focus is singular; my only worry at present is the document open on the laptop before me. My heart pounds nervously and I am aching to get to bed.

This is my mad sprint to complete an essay that is due in a matter of hours. The feeling of distress is familiar, and it is one that I have sworn countless times before never to let myself experience again. But I soon forget the anxiety of the moment, and I once again find myself punching furiously into my keyboard in the dead of the night, forehead creased with stress—avoidable stress borne entirely out of my failure to combat the temptations of procrastination.

Throughout my schooling career, I have always assumed that I am short-changing myself with my routine races against the clock. Conventional wisdom suggests that procrastination is inherently bad, self-inhibiting behaviour that negatively affects achievement. It makes sense that with more time I would be able to engage in further research, furnish my thoughts better, and fashion more meaningful sentences, thereby producing a far superior piece of

writing. More time equals better work, does it not?

As I sat down for yet another desperate deadline-dash however, I found myself wondering if my chronic procrastination is quite so detrimental to my writing as I believe. Underneath all the stress and anxiety of rushing to churn out a body of text, there is a certain thrill. My mind is clear and focused, and I write noticeably quicker. There is no time to be distracted or to obsessively rework my sentences like I usually do. The stress of a deadline grounds me and forces me to focus only on what is most important. Is it then possible that there exists a beneficial form of procrastination?

To answer this question, I delved into the world of procrastination research, where it became clear to me that there exist variations of the act. Chu and Choi (2005) identify two groups of procrastinators: passive procrastinators and active procrastinators. Passive procrastinators are standard procrastinators who delay their tasks until the last minute because of a failure to act promptly. Conversely, active procrastinators make the conscious decision to procrastinate, because they know they produce good work under time pressure. Psychologist Eun Hee Seo (2012) builds on this

research in her study of a group of procrastinating undergraduates all taking the same exam. Her findings show that active procrastinators achieved significantly higher test scores than their passive procrastinator classmates, and even suggest that active procrastinators are “at their best under extreme cramming circumstances” which are defined as studying the day before or the day of the exam (Seo, 2012, p.1338). She ends with a call for the need to acknowledge a “type of procrastination that has a positive effect on achievement” (Seo, 2012, p.1339).

The existence of such a group of people who choose to delay tasks because they work better under the resultant time pressure definitely supports the suspicions I articulated earlier. When I start on a piece of writing late, the necessitated time constraint means that I am forced to do only the most crucial aspects of my work. Instead of spending an excessive amount of time trying to find the perfect word or the best opening line for my essay, I am focused on churning out strong body paragraphs to serve as the bedrock of my argument. Having that extra dose of stress centres our attention, and the limited time means we are kept focused only on the metaphorical ‘money-makers’—the parts of our work that truly matter. Such behaviour constitutes efficient time management, and certainly goes with the increasingly popular aphorism: work smarter, not harder, which focuses on results instead of time. The stress of an impending deadline forces efficient prioritisation and generates useful brain activity. But while procrastination might not be harmful, or perhaps even positively affect your work, I am hesitant to frame it as something that should be

encouraged. I believe that there remains much more to this story, and that there should be scrutiny of its implications for emotional health. For that we need to look inward, into the relationship between procrastination and the human psyche.

In their theory of why we procrastinate, Sirois and Pychyl (2013) posit that procrastination is a form of “emotion regulation” and “short-term mood repair” that arises from our inability to manage our emotions in a beneficial way (p.13). Simply put, we procrastinate not so much because we wish to avoid the task itself, but rather to avoid experiencing the negative emotions we anticipate doing the task will dredge up.

I have come to realise that I put off my writing because I am not confident of my ability to produce good work, and fear disappointing myself and other people. Starting to write means confronting myself with the possibility that my work might not be that good; that it might not end up as shiny and perfect as it exists unwritten in my head. To escape these scary uncertainties, I choose to procrastinate and feel good in the present, deciding to just leave my work for future me to deal with. And when I procrastinate and produce substandard work, procrastination serves as an excuse. It is not that I am not smart enough or lack the skill; it is because I simply did not give myself enough time.

Perhaps your resistance to the task at hand is because it is inherently unappealing, like having to mop a dirty floor. But when procrastination is borne out of more personal feelings of fear and inadequacy, it simply perpetuates such pernicious emotions with the promise of superficial mood

alleviation. In such a scenario, procrastination becomes a sign that you have failed to deal with your harmful emotions in a healthy way.

While I accept this definition of procrastination in describing the passive procrastinator, I feel that this study does not acknowledge the existence of the active procrastinator who procrastinates deliberately, because they know pressure helps them perform their best (Chu & Choi, 2005). Similarly, Seo (2012) fails to account for the passive, unintentional procrastinator who works well under pressure, which is the type I suspect myself to be. I know from experience that if I procrastinate enough, then eventually my panic will override my fear of any negative emotions, and I will be forced to start work. Perhaps that is efficient use of my time, and will lead to quality work, as Seo (2012) seems to suggest. But I question if I should consistently rely on such a mechanism to stir me to action, given that my specific type of procrastination appears to be symptomatic of poor emotion management.

Having gone through these sources, my stand is that a controlled, active type of procrastination may be beneficial, given that it does not arise from unaddressed harmful emotions. If you are a chronic procrastinator like me, it is imperative that you examine the reasons behind your procrastination. If it arises from a dark, malignant place of debilitating insecurity and crushing self-doubt, you need to address such damaging emotions, and re-evaluate your relationship with your work. But if you work well under pressure and deem the productive rewards of procrastination to be worth the stress, then perhaps you might benefit from using procrastination as an extreme time management

tool, where you use the accompanying stress to grant you the focus and clarity necessary for good work.

Unfortunately, in the case of such a highly individual issue like procrastination, we must contend with all these "ifs." It seems to me that ultimately, self-awareness is what is most important. Get in touch with your emotions and learn your habits—understand why and how you procrastinate. And if you do decide that procrastination is beneficial for you, then perhaps you should stop seeing it as some terrible flaw and begin to accept it as simply being part of your work process.

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CC0001

In With the Old

Lim Pin Hui

With my bright blue hair and school jacket, I would stick out like a sore thumb in most places, but nothing compared to being at a neighbourhood coffeeshop at 5:09 am on a Tuesday. The middle-aged stall owners and their (mostly) elderly customers shot curious and confused glances in my direction as I ordered my Teh C Siew Dai and took a seat in the most obscure corner I could find. The white-noise whirr of fans attached to the pillars around the coffeeshop blew around the faint smell of oil wafting through the air as the stalls began preparations for the day. A middle-aged couple running the next over fishball noodle store carry tired but welcoming expressions on their faces as they greet the small stream of early-risers and workers patronising their stall. A young Indian man, the only youth I could spot similarly patronising the coffeeshop, maintains the storefront of the prata shop next door as an older man prepares the hot, doughy flat bread behind the counter.

But beneath the fragrant aroma of prata and kaya butter toast, a new wave of hawkers is rising. With their new brightly lit signboards, be it loud and over-the-top or minimalistic, hawkers serving up fusion foods and other innovative dishes are popping up in hawker centres island wide, owned by younger Singaporeans. However, an obstacle they face is the traditional mindset of “old is gold”; Singaporeans are

thrown off by the attempts at innovation in the hawker centres which appear to be frozen in time. Yet on the flipside, “change is constant.” Faced with two vastly different, maybe even paradoxical, narratives of wanting to hold onto the past while moving into the future, one can feel lost as to the correct direction to take, or whether there is even a correct answer in the first place. Singaporeans encourage innovation and new ideas; however, when changes need to be made, there is always the debate of whether the old should be preserved and in what way, hindering our progress towards the future. If we always reminisce about the past, will our future ever live up to its fullest potential?

In the book *The Value of Culture: On the Relationship between Economics and Arts* by Arjo Klamer (1996), Barend van Heusden and Klamer discuss the differing definitions of “value.” While a subject matter may be valuable in helping us glean a wider understanding of a topic, it is highly possible that an individual will not find functional value in the subject matter at all. For example, a diary entry by a businessman in the 1900s may help historians and society have a clearer picture of how life was like in Singapore back then, however I would not see value in the piece of text if I were not interested in Singapore’s history.

Something valued by society may not hold as high a value to individuals within the society. Singapore has always boasted a diverse demographic relative to that of other countries, each with our own aspirations, needs and wants. For years in the media, hawker culture and other parts of our heritage have been portrayed as places that we “die-die” must preserve for our future generations, to maintain the integrity of our Singaporean culture. I’m not sure about you but when I think of hawker centres, I just associate them with affordable, good food, and not as the treasure trove of our nation as the media portrays it. Furthermore, as prices rise to rival that of food courts, the personal value I peg to hawker food continues to fall. The portrayal of hawker culture as something we must protect at all costs is a top-down stance that has been conveyed to us through the media we consume every day, urging us to put the needs of society before our own. However, we must not forget that our society is a collective of individuals and the decision on what to preserve and maintain should reflect the core sentiments of individuals rather than agencies and politicians who make up only a small portion of our demographics.

In the article *Japan and Identity Change: Why It Matters in International Relations*, Hagstrom and Gustafsson (2015) see the concept of identity as having multiple layers which all interact with each other at the same time to form the semiotics of an identity. These layers could refer to the values important to society or the political structure and environment around which the society revolves. The layers on the surface reflect the deeper core aspects of society’s identity and are less institutionalized, thus they are more likely to

experience changes as compared to more fundamental layers like society’s moral compass and values. Specific issues and policies are debated at these surface levels and are where agencies are most involved.

In debating the conservation of our heritage and as a matter of extension, our national identity, the sentiment of fear always lies in the undercurrents of the discussion. The fear that if even one aspect of our heritage is lost, it could lead to a domino effect of the extinction of other parts of our culture. I would like to raise the idea that Singapore’s identity may be more multifaceted, with various unique aspects that manifest from the latent and institutionalised core aspects. For example, the wave of entrepreneurship which arose from the COVID pandemic as well as the rise of new hawkers stems from the same root of Singaporeans being unwavering and innovative in the face of new challenges. While Singapore’s identity may be constantly changing with the times as we go through economic, social, or political changes, the Singaporean identity will not waver as easily. Despite changes in Singapore’s outward appearance or stance on pressing issues, the values we hold dear such as our resilience in the face of change and helping the less fortunate during tough times will always be there to guide us as individuals even if we physically left Singapore. If you heard somebody speaking with “lor” and “lah” overseas, you would not doubt that they were Singaporean. The Singaporean identity manifests itself in many small cultural semiotics and nuances that can be hard to pinpoint or put into words; in Gen Z slang, it’s a *vibe*. While the appearance of Singapore may face changes such as the

emergence of new and innovative young hawkers, I rest assured that our Singaporean identity will hold true to our core values and beliefs.

Since young, we have been told that it is essential for us to prioritise the needs of the nation before our own, and to a certain extent, it is essential for society as we know it now to function. Despite this, we must not forget that our society is a collective of individuals with our own needs and aspirations that are not in line with the top-down policies of the government, as rightly pointed out by Van Heusden and Klamer (1996, p.45). It is normal that we would be less concerned with preservation of our culture as compared to more pressing needs that directly concern us. The tighter Singapore holds on to the past, the more we may feel frustrated as the culture we grew up with seems to become diluted, because as societies move forward, we cannot reasonably expect a certain place or environment to remain still in time. We would be more concerned with preserving the Singaporean identity rather than Singapore's national identity. The multiple aspects of Singaporeans' daily life come together to form the semiotics of our Singaporean identity as brought up by Hagstrom and Gustafsson (2015), where the past is reflected in the present, and since our core values remain unshaken, I would like to suggest that the future will never stray too far from the past. The deeply institutionalised layers of the

Singaporean identity will shine through the surface in different ways over time. We need not feel frustrated by clinging on to the past while trying to move forward into the future; perhaps we could just embrace the reality as it is. We just need to accept the ways in which our shared values manifest into the unique Singaporean culture of today.

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CC0001

On Our Green Spaces

Soh Jieyi Victoria

When you think “The Botanic Gardens,” the words “man-made,” “manicured” and the like do not usually come to mind. But look a little closer next time you’re there, and it will be easy to see these traits.

I, for one, went to the Gardens on a rainy day. The park was deserted, save for the rain and the occasional brightly-coloured umbrella of a lone visitor amongst the greens and browns of foliage. Without its usual dedicated crowd, the symphony stage looked almost out of place: a distinctly deliberate, man-made creation amongst things of nature. Tall, wide and white, it stood guard over the moat of lily pads and lotus buds surrounding it. The iconic fan structure of the roof, mimicking a flower in bloom, still catches the attention of the few photographers there (myself included).

It wasn’t just the stage. When there are no picnic mats covering the field before the stage, we see that the field is exceptionally uniform—well-trimmed, well-maintained. Not a blade of grass is out of place. A little path, neatly brick-paved, extends out from the stage down towards the lake. Puddles form in the path’s cracks and grooves for your shoes to splash-splash into. The walk down the lake’s perimeter is lined with benches, warning signs and bright orange lifebuoys.

The Gardens has a bit of an ambiguous status between a natural spot of nature and a curated attraction built by human hands. It is more green than concrete grey, and yet the stage, the paths and fields throughout the grounds are evidence of an upheaval of the untouched habitat that was there before. This begs the question: is human encroachment on green spaces a good thing? The Gardens seem to have achieved a coexistence between the natural and the man-made, and it looks like it is here to stay. Why might human encroachment benefit and save our green spaces, particularly the wilder, untouched ones?

Human encroachment would refer to any sort of human action—ranging from large-scale government-level plans to individual-level steps—on Singapore’s wilder patches of greenery, such as Clementi Forest and Dover Forest.

Oscar Holland (2021) offers some insight in his CNN article about the government’s plans to develop Tengah Forest into a “forest town.” The aim of this recent Built-To-Order project is to simultaneously “retain some of (the forest’s) natural greenery,” “promote and protect biodiversity” and create an eco-friendly, livable space to meet housing demands. In this “eco ‘smart’ city,” the spotlight is on the “328-foot-wide ecological corridor (that) will be

maintained through its centre” for Tengah’s wildlife, the “green design principles” governing the plan and the seamless integration of the secondary forest and the residential area. Proposed photos of the estate emphasise the presence of the existing forest’s greenery, which is more unkempt and unmanicured than the usual neatly-trimmed, prim and proper trees and shrubbery in existing HDB estates.

Holland’s (2021) point is clear: Human encroachment can actually give new purpose to these wilder spaces while still preserving (some parts of) them. This saves forests and other wild spaces from getting completely bulldozed for land in the future, which is a very real possibility. Singapore is land-scarce, and the constant need to build infrastructure prompts the government and developers to maximise every potential option to increase the amount of land available (Paulo, 2019). Holland’s article also reveals another point: by allowing government action on wild spaces, the wild spaces would be granted some form of state protection, thus protecting them from any unlawful clearing or encroachment. Of course, all this will still depend on how important the preservation and protection of these wild spaces are to the government in question.

On the contrary, Yun Hye Hwang and Sarah Ichioka (2020) argue that Singapore’s wild spaces are better off without human encroachment or intervention. In their CNA commentary article, they explore the effects of the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown had on Singapore’s greenery and wild spaces as they went months without regular cutting and pruning. Where there once were “closely mown grass patches,”

there were now “tropical wildflowers, forest shrub seedlings and native tree saplings,” and “more butterflies, bees and birds were seen flitting about.” These “renaturalised” pockets of nature, as Hwang and Ichioka call them, can “support more varied and resilient ecosystems.” Preserving wild spaces and allowing them to “renaturalise” has other benefits, for example: reducing pollution due to a decreased need for leaf blowers and land mowers, and helping to fight climate change as they mitigate the effects of flash floods and heat, among others. Additionally, spaces that have already “renaturalised” have gained widespread public appreciation.

Hwang and Ichioka (2020) suggest that human action on wild spaces should be kept to a minimum. We can infer their disapproval of frequent, as well as large-scale encroachment. They argue that the best benefit we can offer to these spaces is to simply let them flourish—or continue flourishing—on their own, as this is the best way these spaces can become healthy pillars that can support local biodiversity. This will similarly give our wild spaces more purpose and value, providing a stronger case for preserving them. Preservation is now especially crucial given the backdrop of a worrying loss of our biodiversity to human developments, such as land reclamation (Chang, 2003). It is important to note that Hwang and Ichioka’s commentary is less of explaining why human encroachment does not benefit our wild spaces, but instead more of discussing the extent of human encroachment and why less is more when it comes to saving these spaces. They acknowledge that some form of maintenance and pruning is still needed to make sure these spaces stay optimally healthy (Hwang & Ichioka, 2020).

At first glance, Holland (2021) and the Hwang—Ichioka team (2020) seem to be on opposing sides. However, Holland's source actually complements Hwang and Ichioka's, because he provides an example of the very type of human action in wild spaces that would be beneficial: human action that prioritises the health and preservation of these spaces. Hwang and Ichioka's article also offers insight on how human maintenance on a "forest town" should look like moving forward: kept to a minimum, in order to allow the forest (or what remains of it after the town has been integrated in) to continue to flourish.

So, why might human encroachment not be so bad for our wilder spaces after all? Both sources reveal that in theory, encroachment does benefit these spaces by effectively protecting these spaces, from both the very threat of being cleared and from ecological diseases. However, this is not a green light for humans to recklessly trample onto what wild pockets of nature we have left. There must be careful consideration of the intentions, type, and extent of said encroachment, as these will be what determines whether our actions will truly help our wild spaces or not.

But why? Why should you and I care so much about how our wild spaces are treated? In the past, our government's way of crafting environmental policies was more authoritarian-like and top-down. Policies and plans were approved and passed with virtually zero consultation with the public (Hobson, 2005). However, in recent years, this has shifted to become more open and responsive towards public opinion. When the government announced in January 2021 that Dover Forest will be cleared, they

received much backlash, both from local green groups and the general public (Teng, 2021). The National Parks Board's response was to halt and revise its plans with new edits and criteria that were in line with the public outcry (Teng, 2021). While the Singapore government still has a long way to go in genuinely responding to public feedback, it is evident that, when it comes to policymaking for the environment, they have become a lot more conversational and willing to engage in two-way dialogue with the public. Everyday voices like yours and mine now carry much more weight when it comes to the fate of our wild spaces. And, in an age where most of the human actions we see do our environment more harm than good, it is thus truly more important than ever that you and I start paying attention; start being loud, and start speaking up, for our green spaces.

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The Vicious Cycle of Stigmatising Negative Emotions in Social Contexts

Yeo Ya Hui

The grip of my pen loosens as a breeze of fresh air rushes through my lungs, expelling what had made my chest heavy, ironing out the wrinkles between my brows. Painting the fresh pages of my journal lifted invisible weights, leaving me with a delightful sigh of relief yet equipped with a new sense of unease. Journaling felt comfortable, supported by an unextinguishable confidence that inanimate objects kept mum.

The sounds of the journal flipping to a new page always coincides with the occasions where a suffocating sensation overwhelms me, where words were stuck in my throat. Expressing it out loud was unimaginable, in fear of incurring looks of disdain. However, they were challenging to ignore. I had to let them out. Otherwise, I might lose a screw. Thus, I wrote.

My pen danced off the paper against Beethoven's bumblebee. The ink flows ceaselessly as letters were strewn across the page in an illegible manner, spiralling from one to another. Harsh comments were penned. An instance was "This professor should just quit his job.", followed by some self-justification such as "He doesn't do his job properly." before grilling the subject to my heart's content.

Intriguingly, the writing becomes increasingly legible and organised as emotions subside and reason begins to seep in. Glances of the previously frenzied rants made one cringe and self-conscious. Statements of self-reflections began to form. "Was I being sensitive?", "Was there a need to be angry?", "An adult wouldn't handle it like that." Nuances of berating myself were found scattered on the pages attempting to be a "mature" human. This self-correcting behaviour observed was truly unexpected as each entry began with the intention of unwinding rather than end with a sense of shame, resulting in discomfort.

In school and the workplace, such writing would never be seen. Emails would be addressed in an uplifting manner no matter the content. Decorated with pretty words and well-crafted sentences that sound especially pleasant, written with self-control and reservedness. An instance was "Hi Professor! I would really appreciate it if you could address my concern that was previously mentioned. Thank you and I look forward to your reply!" No signs of discontentment would be detected despite being frustratingly left without reply for weeks. Only politeness lingers.

Looking back at my journal entries, an unwillingness to acknowledge the exhibition of negative emotions after regaining my senses was distinct. Evidence of self-reflections proved I had found it to be shameful as I criticise myself for it. It was natural to experience such emotions while facing unhappy situations, why was it shameful? What drove me to self-reflect? At the heart of it, could my weird self-correcting behaviour be influenced by societal expectations where one must show self-restraint while expressing negative emotions like in my emails? Extrapolating further, why is the stigmatisation of negative emotions so prevalent in social contexts such as schools and the workplace?

The conventional perspective of emotions being categorised as positive, or negative is rigid is the perspective of David (2018) in her TedTalk “The Gift and Power of Emotional Courage.” She surveyed over 70,000 people and one third of them had either judged themselves for holding supposedly “bad” emotions or actively try to avoid them. She highlights that being positive has become a moral practice, a propriety and it becomes a tyranny of positivity. People either bottled up, brooded, or pushed aside natural emotions labelled as negative to embrace false positivity, losing their capacity to deal with reality. More significantly, this stigma spills from one to another. Individuals unintentionally deplore others when emotions considered negative are shared, rush to find a remedy and fail to acknowledge it as fundamentally valid. She later concludes off with the need to have emotional agility, to discern the cause of our emotions, not attribute it to one's personality or immediately race for emotional exits.

Understandably, the label “negative” translates to bad, unproductive, and unwanted. It is something to be avoided. The stigmatisation of negative emotions substantially arises from the fear of receiving a penalty for expressing them or even holding them. For example, during school presentations, frowning, a way to express negative emotions like frustration would warrant the student a downgrade despite carrying other positive connotations like displaying concentration. Smiles, portrayals of excitement, however, would be rewarded. At work, revealing discontentment towards the work of subordinates would gain one titles of being demanding or difficult to work with. The Human Resources team would then request a meeting for a counselling session in the guise of a simple talk. In our social contexts, a reward and punishment system clearly exists, reinforcing the display of positive emotions and deterring the display of negative emotions. Punishments involve criticism, a blow to reputation, etc., which further incentivises the portrayal of fake positive emotions. With that, the portrayal of positive and negative emotions is categorised as right and wrong, respectively. We have been conditioned. Thus, although our feelings are justified, we condemn ourselves for doing wrong instead of right. Being humans, we crave for social acceptance. The values of society seeps right into our own to some extent, ultimately contributing to the spread of stigmatisation of negative emotions.

Another perspective would be from the scientific journal “Perceiving Societal Pressure to be Happy is Linked to Poor Well-being, Especially in Happy Nations” (Dejonckheere et al., 2022). Societies pride

themselves in producing happy citizens, implementing the World Happiness Index (WHI) as an indicator. The paper highlights this praiseworthy movement ironically as a double-edged sword as it overly accentuates positivity while neglecting negativity. Heavy emphasis could be observed from rising numbers of positivity coaches, self-help books and most importantly, the happy lives of social media influencers. The public idolises them, mirroring the desires and standards of society. However, the over emphasis on positivity cultivates the idea that there is little room for negativity, building unrealistic emotional standards which many subliminally accept. Consequently, negative emotions are stigmatised, regarded as dysfunctional and concerning, something that needs to be cured. Unfortunately, experiencing such emotions is inevitable for all, making the norm unfeasible to be followed consistently. The perceived incompetency to meet those standards results in negative meta-emotions, pessimistic self-attitudes, and the aggravation of unwanted emotional states. Ultimately, the paper then concludes that countries with higher WHI have larger discrepancies between felt societal pressure to be happy and one's actual reality, thus poorer well-being is observed.

Undeniably, these unachievable standards instigate the reflection of experiencing negative emotions. We feel unhappy being unable to reach those standards and anger for experiencing that unhappiness. Intruding thoughts such as "Why am I the only one suffering?", "Why are other people living happily other than me?" arise, causing one to fall deeper into the pit-hole of negative emotions. It occurs to me that nobody would be pleased to be at

the bottom of the food chain or receive the smaller piece of the cake as it is unsightly, humiliating, and unfair. Everyone wants to appear better than others. Cases of flaunting of lifestyle, friends, etc., is especially prevalent online, leading to the trend of showcasing "I am living a happy life." In the workplace, it could be how people are receiving salary increments and promotions. In school, perhaps it would be the attainment of good grades and internships. Happy occasions would indisputably receive more coverage while negative ones are hidden as it is nothing to be proud of. Hence, unrealistic social expectations which might be different from actual emotional experiences contribute to the stigmatisation of negative emotions.

Comparing both sources, David (2018) focused on the labelling of certain emotions as negative and the punishment for revealing those emotions. The fear of punishment and the love for belongingness eventually led to people spreading the rules of the game. Dejonckheere et al. (2022) highlighted excessive emphasis on positivity while neglecting negativity which created unrealistic social norms. Individuals aim to tower over others, and it becomes a battle of whose life is happier, creating even more emphasis on positivity. These two vicious cycles, despite their differences, ultimately led to the stigmatisation of negative emotions. Just where do they converge?

Some questions to consider would be why is the punishment system effective and why do individuals care about where they stand? Fundamentally, it all boils down to protecting their ego, known as a person's sense of self-esteem or self-importance. Protecting one's self-image and self-worth. Most

people would protect their ego, resulting in the motivation to create better impressions, protect one's reputation, and avoid criticism. People create criterions to make comparisons, to find out where they stand. Similarly, countries do it through WHI. The display of negative emotions happens to be one such factor that affects our ego. Thus, I believe, without the need to protect one's ego, the stigmatisation of negative emotions would be greatly reduced. Perhaps one day, the stigmatisation of negative emotions will decrease as well if it becomes unrelated to what would hurt our ego.

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To See Everything and Yet Nothing at All

Chen Min Jien

Founded in June 2019, the Botanical Art Society is a community comprising botanical artists and enthusiasts. Members are often seen within the Botanic Gardens, positioning themselves on pavements or grass patches for hours on end. All for the sake of observing a plant specimen, trying to capture as many details as possible from all angles imaginable. With such an intense display of dedication and concentration, unfazed by the tropical heat and awkward stares of curious bystanders, one cannot help but wonder what intricacies are being created.

Thankfully, I was allowed to interview an artist, at her workplace. Upon entering her atelier, the lingering smell of paint and mold immediately engulfed me, a tell-tale sign of an artist deeply passionate about her work. She happened to be amidst a painting, the likes of which beget a closer inspection. It depicted an array of strange-looking plants illustrated with such uncanny resemblance to their life counterpart. Their deep green was contrasted by a clean white background, exuding such complexity yet simplicity. The level of detail, right down to the individual veins on the leaves was so remarkably painted, to the point that I imagined myself within the plant's natural habitat, deep within a tropical rainforest, surrounded by the smell of

damp trees and the rhapsody of buzzing and chirping.

Amidst the awe and admiration, I wondered—in the age of advanced cameras, capable of capturing detailed images, was there purpose in such a realistic form of art? In response, the artist instructed me to take a photo of the specimen she was painting and compare it to her work. Strangely enough, when comparing both images side by side, the painting appears more like the plant, whereas the photograph seems to show everything and yet nothing at all.

To that the artist explained—botanical art is not just about aesthetics, it is the harmony between aesthetics and the study of a plant's anatomy. Botanical artists put great efforts into the said study, collecting multiple specimens of the same species, observing them from different angles, dissecting them, and analysing them under a microscope. The end result is not just a piece of art, it is also a journal compiled through copious amounts of research. Such work is something that a photograph cannot imitate.

Reflecting on the analogy of the difference between the painting and photograph, has our reliance on

technology blinded us from discerning the true nature of a subject? In an era of rapid technological advancements, where information can be easily obtained, have we lost the ability to discover? Today, many would religiously accept answers from Google without asking deeper questions; push buttons on a calculator without understanding the formula—a literal example of doing without thinking, learning without understanding. Have we limited ourselves to being satisfied with surface-level information, to see everything about a subject and yet nothing at all?

Technology is often described to be the harbinger of change in society, but instead of inspiring a change for the better, has it influenced a change for the worse? Carr (2010) depicts how the internet has affected the way our brain processes information in “The Shallows: How the Internet Is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember.” The internet is described as a massive database capable of processing and providing information instantaneously. Its inception has brought society to a new realm of convenience—hours of painstaking research condensed into minutes, a trove of information in the form of digital media, where anything can be found. The benefits it provides have made it an indispensable commodity in our everyday lives. We use the internet for everything, from work to entertainment. This dependency is reflected in a quote by Kemeny (1972), “a true symbiotic relationship between man and computer”. Consequentially, the more we use the internet to influence our decisions, the greater the influence the internet has on our minds. Carr (2010) reinforces this theory by sharing his personal

experience and that of others, on how each struggle to digest lengthy articles, a feat that they were once able to perform intuitively, and how they now opt for excerpts or simply skim through its entirety. In the words of Carr (2010), “Once I was a scuba diver in a sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”

This theory illustrates the way digital citizens absorb information. As Carr (2010) suggests, the internet is a tool for deriving information quickly and conveniently, however, excessive usage has wired our brains to want to arrive at answers in a similar quick and convenient fashion. We have become overly accustomed to the rapid influx of information, to the point that our mind focuses solely on the sheer quantity taken in, disregarding the quality. We are unwilling, or even unable to analyse a subject deeply if it comes at the expense of time and effort. Perhaps our unhealthy obsession with abundance and convenience has narrowed our vision to the point that we are only able to see things through the lenses of technology. Like a frog in a well, we are easily satisfied with what is in front of us, without ever contemplating what is beyond.

How a technologically influenced society processes information can also be reflected in the evolution of popular music, as society’s defining characteristics can often be deduced through its musical preferences, according to Fitzgerald (2019). Fitzgerald (2019) supports his claim by comparing popular music of each decade from the 1980s to the 2000s. He observed that before the 2000s each decade had an outlier, a song that lingered in people’s minds for a significant period. In 1997,

“Candle in the wind” by Elton John, rereleased after the death of Princess Diana became a huge hit and remains the highest-selling song in Britain to this day. People applied that song as a means to cope with the premature death of their beloved, depicting that music was more than just a mere form of entertainment. It was an aspect of life. There were numerous outliers before the 2000s, however, moving into the 21st century, music seems to have lost its impact. The works of up-and-coming artists come and go. Few stuck around for long. Fitzgerald (2019) hypothesised that this may be a result of “saturation, accessibility, and advancements in technology.” Over time, sensational music may well be a thing of the past.

This study reflects the way society perceives concepts and ideas through music appreciation. Given how accessible music has become and how quickly it is being produced, people often hear it without listening, focusing simply on the rhythm rather than the emotions, the intentions, and the vibrancy of life the artist is trying to convey. Eventually, everything starts to sound colourless, repetitive, and maybe catchy but void of deep meaning. Perhaps technology has flooded our minds with all kinds of information that nothing amazes us anymore. It has made us fickle-minded, constantly chasing after novelties, yet uninterested in whatever we receive. Could this lack of interest be the cage that constricts our ability to deepen our understanding of the world around us?

So, how has technology affected our ability to process information? Carr (2010) claims that it has programmed our brains to mindlessly absorb

whatever information spoon-fed to us. Fitzgerald (2019) deduces that it has diminished our sense of thrill from encountering something new. Despite the differing opinions, both point to an undeniable truth—people have lost the patience to explore and appreciate the significance beneath surface-level information. This revelation is indeed unfortunate since technology was intended as a tool, not the craftsmen. It was designed to aid the advancement of society, not guide it. Yet, many grab hold of technology as the sole crutch to life’s challenges—googling answers to typical problems regarding work, health, and even relationships, rather than solving them through the tried-and-tested method: experience.

In essence, people are constricting themselves to the limited solutions derived from technology when they could be exploring the limitless possibilities and the deeper meanings of ideas in their lives. Like how a single image captured of a plant specimen from a solitary angle cannot convey the same depth of information when compared to a painting designed to capture all facets of said specimen. The understanding of a subject obtained through the single viewpoint offered by technology cannot measure up to the cumulative experiences acquired through years of fieldwork and research. Life is not just about knowing; it is a journey of discovery and growth. Therefore, whenever we are feeling lost, uninspired, or unmotivated, the solution is as simple as setting aside our devices and going out to explore—upon which we may realize that the world is far more attractive than what technology has depicted.

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I would also like to express my thanks to my grandmother, Anna Lu, who was my main source of inspiration. Her journey and views as a professional botanical artist was the foundation required for me to build my ideas upon, when writing this essay. A case in point where not everything that is old is irrelevant, and to look forward we must sometimes look back. There is always something we can learn from the experiences of others.

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Highlighting the Unseen: The Influence of Everyday Architecture

Lim Shi Ying

Compass One is largely monochrome. The building is completely white save for horizontal grey trimmings that cut across in streaks. Its titular name is displayed as a large sign with 'Compass' written out in blue lettering and 'One' in purple. The only other hints of colour are advertising signages like the stark blue and white of Kiddy Palace. Inside the mall, blinding lights and white panels hang from the ceiling. In the small gaps between these lights and panels lies a void of dark empty space. However, in contrast, I see Popular with its iconic red walls and colourful stock. Opposite, Chateraise smells like fresh, sweet cream. Their glass display hosts a variety of vibrant looking cakes that look absolutely delicious to devour. It is glaringly obvious that the stores here all year-round are infinitely more colourful.

It feels to me that the stripping down of the mall to its bare form is intentional. Possibly by minimising visual noise, the stores lining the mall's interior look jarringly vibrant in comparison. Perhaps in an effort to subtly redirect the consumer's attention, the mall design is deliberately made formless and non-distinct in order to create a non-invasive shopping

atmosphere. At least, that is how I interpret my own experiences with the mall. In that light, it is surprising to me how many inferences I am able to make about the mall design and my own experiences despite its dull appearance. Perhaps it is all a coincidence or overthinking on my part, but the idea that design is able to impact us is fascinating. Isn't architectural design a purely physical concept? How is it able to affect something as abstract as our minds and emotions, which, in turn, govern our behaviour? Does that mean that every building we see has its own features that potentially affect our behaviour? Following that line of questioning, the main question I find myself wondering is: how is everyday architectural design able to influence us?

In "The hidden ways that architecture affects how you feel," Bond (2017) proposes that the layouts of architecture matter more than we think. Like how "visual complexity of natural environments act as a kind of mental balm" (p.16), Bond (2017) implies that the decor and structure of interiors do the same. A real-life example Bond (2017) brings in is in a VR study done that concluded most people felt better in

rooms with curved geometry as compared to rooms with more sharp, rectangular geometry. Hence, the way a room influences how we feel and behave can be said to be due to its visual arrangement or features. Additionally, Bond (2017) states that “one thing that is guaranteed to make people feel negative about living in a city is a constant sense of being lost or disorientated” (p.23). Similarly, a confusing interior creates a sense of disorientation which leaves real emotional distress in people. Being unable to develop a sense of direction hinders people from feeling “that they have some control over their environment” (Bond, 2017, p.28), leaving visitors on-guard and more anxious.

Bond’s (2017) writings emphasise that physical layouts of a building—its layout and how it visually looks—can influence the individual. I can see Bond’s (2017) point even in the context of my own life. Having visited Yishun’s Northpoint City mall myself many times, its winding layout has always made it difficult for me to even recall the exact location of a store. There is always a biting sense of anxiety I feel when navigating the mall, making me less keen on stopping by a shop in case I lose what little sense of direction I have. Likewise, the effect of visual arrangements in buildings can be seen in our taste for different kinds of interiors when buying a house, or how many of us would find it strange and off-putting if a high-class restaurant lacked high quality decor. Hence, according to Bond (2017), the visual and by extension, physical features of a building are reasons why we can be influenced by everyday architecture.

Moving away from Bond’s (2017) ideas about the visual aspects of architecture, I have to wonder if

there are other dimensions to architecture that help it influence us as well, such as our other senses. In “Senses of place: architectural design for the multisensory mind,” Spence (2020) considers how our other senses affect how we perceive architecture. Spence (2020) proposes that smell, touch, taste, and hearing are equally important senses that influence the way we perceive architecture—and in turn, are affected by it. To illustrate this, Spence (2020) highlights how “the design of a restaurant can have an impact on your ‘conditioned response’ to the taste of the food” (p.12), or how there have been studies on the beneficial aspects of aromatherapy which evokes the olfactory sense. Consider establishments like massage parlours or spas which deliberately conjure certain scents by lighting incense or scented candles in order to foster a calm, relaxing environment for their customers. Consider as well how restaurants aim to eradicate unpleasant bathroom scents in order to preserve a good dining experience for diners. In these examples, we can see that the olfactory sense becomes a tool architects can manipulate in order to conjure a more welcoming, tranquil atmosphere in their designs. In a similar vein, according to Spence (2020), our other senses are equally important factors to be considered when discussing how architecture influences us.

When it comes to everyday architecture, our first impressions most likely revolve around how it visually looks or how it is visually arranged. However, Spence’s (2020) argument proposes that considering the other ways design engages our other senses is crucial to fully understanding how we are influenced by everyday design as well. As

our perception of the world is shaped by our different senses, buildings can leverage that by manipulating the way each sense is evoked. Each evoked (or unevoked) sense then contributes to a larger, meaningful overall influence. For example, theatres employ large, loudspeakers for sound and have comfortable feeling seats to create an immersive and enjoyable movie experience. Therefore, it is very much plausible that the influence of everyday architecture can be attributed to how they incorporate multisensory features into their design.

While Bond (2017) covers the visual aspects of everyday buildings, Spence (2020) shows us the importance of our other senses as well. However, I feel that both their points fail to account for a variability in how buildings influence individuals. For example, though classrooms are designed with the purpose of education in mind, the effectiveness of such a space can vary from student to student. I feel that this is due to a third factor: who we are at the moment of being exposed to a building is crucial in determining that building's influence on our behaviour. Our past experiences, current state of mind, and even beliefs can affect how we interpret the features of a building. To illustrate, the stimulation of the olfactory and taste senses of an individual in Compass One's basement would not work as well for an individual who has recently eaten and wants nothing to do with food. Likewise, a local who has explored the misleading paths of Northpoint City enough times would be undeterred by the confusing layout. Therefore, it can perhaps be said that the ability of everyday architecture to affect us can be traced back to ourselves. The influence of

everyday architecture thus seems to be ultimately a dynamic experience that changes from person to person.

In summary, the multisensory experience we perceive when entering a building has a role to play in how the architecture guides us towards a certain behaviour or response. The extent of this influence is not fixed, however, and changes depending on the person being influenced. Though everyday buildings often go unnoticed by us in favour of focusing our attention on other matters, knowing how they affect us can perhaps reveal interesting insights about places we have visited many times before.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my tutor, Ms. Christine Lee Wai Wah, for her invaluable advice. The feedback that was given has been immensely helpful in polishing and transforming my previous drafts into this final essay. Writing this op-ed had been difficult and required multiple revisions as well as do-overs, but her guidance made it easier to persevere and write something that I am proud of.

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CC0001

Modified Fish: Harmless Gimmick or Cruel Abuse?

Seow Yang Han, Darryl

The pervasive stench of fish and the muggy atmosphere made it hard to breathe but to me, this was the feeling of pure bliss. My undying love for fish and aquariums had brought me to Arowana Avenue, an aquarium shop in Clementi. Aquarium shops have always been about the fish for me, and this was no exception. Perusing their monster fish selection, majestic arowanas, gars, snakeheads, cichlids, and catfish instantly captivated me. Unfortunately, many monster fish were selectively bred short-bodied variants. This meant that the ratio of body-length to tail-length of the fish was much lower, leading to a shorter, stouter full-grown adult fish.

Upon further examination, their regular-sized fish were also mostly modified. There were colour variants, physical genetic modifications, and physical modifications. Colour variants can either refer to fish that were bred selectively or genetically altered to display certain desired colours. Genetic physical modifications take selective breeding one step further, giving the fish modified features. This includes balloon variants—fish that were bred to have compressed bodies and curved spines to appear balloon-like, long-finned variants and scale modifications, among others. The fancy goldfish on

sale showcased these modifications rolled in a single animal. Their rotund, balloon-like bodies covered in shimmering orange, white and black scales bobbed about their tank, propelled by long, flowy double tails. This is a far cry from their ancestors' sleek, hydrodynamic forms.

Physical modifications, meanwhile, do not involve genetics. Physically modified fish are injected with ink to show different colours, essentially a tattoo, or have parts of their body cut off. A particularly cruel example on display was the heart parrot, which was essentially a blood parrot that had its tail cut off so that its body forms a heart shape.

In the defence of Arowana Avenue, most aquarium shops offer some degree of modified fish, simply because customers are interested in purchasing them. Many customers prefer short-bodied monster fish as they lack the space to house regular monster fish. Others, still, prefer variants simply because they look “cute” and are blissfully unaware of the realities of such modifications. Worst of all, some customers see fish as mere displays rather than live animals and thus only care about the appearance of their “display.” Humans have been altering animals to suit our needs for millennia.

However, in the aquarium trade, such modifications are often done purely to pander to customers' whims and fancies.

From poor genetics to diminished swimming ability or even increased risk of infections, these fish suffer lasting consequences due to their modifications. Many modified fish fail to reach the end of their natural lifespan, dying due to complications from their deformed bodies. This made me wonder, is it justified to modify fish in the aquarium trade?

In the article "Fish Intelligence, Sentience and Ethics," Brown (2014) contends with several misconceptions held by the general public as well as the scientific community. He provides arguments grounded in experimental evidence, supporting the idea that fish possess levels of intelligence, consciousness and sentience required to be considered as part of our moral circle. Brown (2014) posits that bony fish have senses on par with most mammals. Following this, he discusses experiments that attempted to assess the cognitive abilities of fish, concluding that most fish have a substantial level of intelligence, including forms of intelligence typically thought to be reserved for animals with higher-order cognitive processes such as social intelligence and self-recognition. Finally, he debunks the mistaken belief that fish do not feel pain and details how divergent biological evolution can produce similar results, despite structural differences in organisms.

Brown (2014) provides a fascinating perspective on fish by fleshing out the similarities between fish and terrestrial animals. He proposes that fish should at least be considered as sentient creatures, with the

cognitive abilities of some mammals. With these findings in mind, we can conclude that most fish at the very least have a capacity for suffering akin to that of mammals. This means that the morality of fish modifications can be considered on the same level as modifying any other sentient animal, as opposed to modifying cold, unfeeling automata.

Offering another perspective on morality and animals, Lindsay (2017) argues that having the capacity for rationality or sentience is not enough to include a being in our moral community. Rather, he claims that consideration of the objectives of morality is also required, pointing out that "having interests is a necessary but not sufficient condition for moral status" (p. 4). He claims that the objectives of morality are to ensure the cohesiveness of a community, build trust and improve undesirable conditions. The interests of any entity must therefore be congruent with these objectives to be awarded moral status. Lindsay (2017) concludes by asserting that we have different moral obligations to animals, depending on their place in our communities, but makes the distinction from being cruel towards animals, which is almost universally condemned.

Lindsay (2017) sheds an intriguing light on the morality of animals. In the context of fish modifications, where farms and breeders are mainly responsible for any modifications to their fish, fish take the role of livestock—products to be sold for a profit. Thus, under Lindsay's (2017) frame of analysis, it is permissible for farms to treat fish as livestock. According to him, there are no objections to modifying fish, provided that these modifications are not cruel to them.

Since these modifications are clearly legal, we are left to evaluate them from a moral standpoint. By providing a scientific perspective on fish capabilities, Brown's (2014) writings show that fish fulfil Lindsay's (2017) necessary conditions of possessing sentience and rationality for an animal to be given moral status. However, the specific context of ornamental fish farming means that aquarium fish do not meet the sufficient condition of having a role which builds communities. While fish in these farms would not be included in moral circles, this does not mean they should be treated cruelly. It is thus necessary to evaluate the cruelty of each type of modification to determine which ones are morally justifiable.

To discuss cruelty objectively, I refer to Tanner's (2015) definition which states that cruelty is "knowingly causing unnecessary pain and/or suffering." Her definition gives us three conditions which must be fulfilled for an action to be considered cruel. First, it must be done with intention. Next, it must cause pain or suffering. Lastly, the actor must have chosen to perform the action despite having some other less cruel alternatives. All three parts of this definition must be present for an action to be cruel.

All modifications must be done knowingly by fish farms in order to be perpetuated within the gene pool or, in the case of physical modifications, to even occur. All modifications are also, at least initially, unnecessary. Given that modified fish were artificially created, there could not have been any naturally occurring massive commercial demand for modified fish in the beginning. The argument that modifications are necessary to provide fish

farms with income is flawed, as they were only made necessary by the farms themselves. Hence, the only remaining criteria that determines if a modification is cruel, and therefore unjustified, is whether it causes pain or suffering.

Unfortunately, both types of physical modifications inflict pain and suffering on fish, making them cruel and unjustified. Both types of physical modifications increase disease susceptibility and reduce the mobility of fish. Physical modifications, specifically those that involve mutilation, also cause severe, acute pain, and can lead to infections. Colour variants are thus the only non-cruel modifications as they involve only artificial selection or genetic modification of fish embryos. They do not cause pain nor suffering as these modifications are purely cosmetic and do not involve invasive procedures.

Going back to my initial question, this means that the only justifiable modification is colour variants.

However, the reality of the aquarium trade is that it is just like any other industry. Suppliers always have to balance business decisions with ethics. Given that modified fish have become almost commonplace within the aquarium hobby, it is unrealistic and unreasonable to expect them to disappear completely. There will always be those who want more colourful danios or a cute goldfish. With this in mind, as pet owners and hobbyists, the least we could do is to reduce our demand for modified fish and treat the ones we already have with care.

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I would like to thank my tutor, Ms. Soh Jyr Minn, for believing in me and pushing me to write about a topic that interested me rather than generalising and writing about all pet modifications. That made the writing process a lot more enjoyable and gave me a chance to dive into one of my passions. She also offered great insights which helped me sharpen my essay writing skills.

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CC0001

Pause

Tan Shu-En

Time is passing too quickly for my liking. It feels like I've zoomed past the year, and yet tomorrow is the start of a new week again. As with every Sunday night, I drag my feet into my hall of residence in Nanyang Technological University (NTU). I try to command my legs to speed up. This path to my room usually takes three minutes and seven seconds—anything more is time wasted. I can't afford to lose time on nothing but a simple cardio exercise.

I start trudging up the endless flights of steps, which remind me of the insurmountable mountains of work waiting for me. As if on cue, my willpower fails me. I know I need to be productive right now. But my legs disobey me too and plonk me down rather unceremoniously on the steps, next to a moth resting on a wall. It seems to be busy judging my every move.

My thoughts buzz angrily as each of my assignments berate me for not sprinting up the stairs and getting started on them. Thankfully, a symphony of crickets come to my rescue, and their gentle serenade makes the noise in my head fade to a mumble. They invite me to listen closely to the story of the night. A wild boar snorts in the distance, trying to play its part in this orchestra of nature. Even the flickering motion sensor lights add a weird,

offbeat rhythm to the chorus. They're triggered by other students returning from home like me, disappearing hurriedly into their rooms under the watchful eye of the moon. Are they just like me, unable to slow down and only able to see the next item on their to-do list?

Tonight, the moon is accompanied by tiny friends twinkling at me to say hi. It's a rare occurrence to see the galaxy in its full glory because of the light pollution in most parts of Singapore. But with some luck, several constellations can be visible in the secluded NTU campus.

The sky is clear, but my thoughts are clouded. This picturesque view, complete with its very own soundtrack, is quite nice. But this calm is too eerily long for one who is used to rushing around like a headless chicken. I ask the moon for its wisdom, for I feel a pressing urge to go back to my room and just... do something.

The moth on the wall catches my eye again. It has been there for more than five minutes. I wonder what it's thinking. Is it worried about its next meal or wondering why this random human is here? Or is it simply relaxing and enjoying the breather that the wall provides?

In this world where everything has become instant and fast-paced, taking a moment to be still can feel uncomfortable or even wrong. There is always somewhere to be and something to do. Why does it feel unnatural for us Singaporeans to slow down? Why have we lost the simple pleasure of stopping to smell the flowers?

Keating's (2018) analysis of Singapore's "kiasu" culture could offer some insight into this phenomenon. Otherwise known as the fear of losing out, "kiasuism" can be attributed to the country's geographical location and lack of natural resources, forcing our ancestors to be "kiasu" to carve out a place for Singapore in the world. Such competitiveness has been instilled into each generation of Singaporeans, who believe that there is always more that can be done, that one needs to rely on themselves and stay ahead of everyone else. As such, "kiasuism" can be observed everywhere—such as taking as much food as possible at buffets and enrolling one's children in multiple enrichment classes. "Kiasuism" may even have caused Singaporeans to view their own society negatively, as they "listed 'kiasu' in their top 10 perceptions of Singapore society, along with being competitive and self-centred" in a 2015 survey (Keating, 2018).

Slowing down is simply not an option in Singapore's "kiasu" society. There is always a need to be productive. Knowing that one's peers are "kiasu" and competitive puts even more pressure on people to stay busy. This naturally makes it difficult for Singaporeans to slow down.

I feel that there are a few deep-seated fears behind the need for all this hustle. Maybe Singaporeans

think that giving up the very thing that brought us decades of success is a recipe for disaster, and without "kiasuism" we might fail as a country. What if we waste all our hard work because we changed our ways? There could also be fear of going against the tide and choosing to slow down, because everyone else is moving much faster. But could there be more to this problem?

Tartakovsky (2019) points out that people know what to do to slow down, like taking time for themselves and managing workload. But in reality, many struggle to do so and end up busying themselves more. The author attributes this to busyness being "a medal of honour" in society. Clinical social worker Panthea Saidipour explains that one could keep busy to stay ahead or surpass others. One could feel that they only deserve to rest after enough work has been done, which may be what their parents practised (Tartakovsky, 2019). Katrina Taylor, a marriage and family therapist, mentions how people use busyness to appear put together in front of others. Slowing down could make the people around them view them in a bad light (Tartakovsky, 2019).

The article concludes that there is no one definite reason, nor is there one way to slow down. Both differ by individual, and what helps someone relax may not work for another. The experts list concrete steps readers can take to identify the root causes and find the best solution for themselves.

Tartakovsky (2019) expands on other possible reasons why people are unable to slow down without giving a specific answer. One's environment plays an important role in shaping one's beliefs

since young, and both have a great impact on one's relationship with rest. Singapore's "kiasu" society as mentioned by Keating (2018) certainly puts more pressure on people to push themselves to keep going without rest. However, I am surprised as I didn't think that slowing down could be different from person to person. Maybe my observations of others not being able to slow down are wrong. Maybe they have their own ways of slowing down that I do not understand. Perhaps, the people around us have found ways to rest amidst the hustle and bustle of life, but we don't see that and end up thinking that we should be working as hard as them.

In today's world, so many things are competing for our attention that we might have neglected to pay attention to our need for rest. Since we are all unique individuals with different circumstances, the only definite answer to my question is self-reflection. Asking ourselves why we can't slow down and what we can do for ourselves will uncover some of the deepest feelings we have, and hopefully we will find some elusive rest.

Tonight, a clear sky greets me again, but this time my mind feels more at ease. I stop to enjoy a rush of cool air, which is more than welcome after a long walk back to my NTU hall. I turn my head as a student swears loudly, struggling to drag a huge basket of clothes to the laundry room. I'm reminded of my own love for doing laundry. The smell of

detergent and rhythmic tumble of the washing machine never fail to give me a sense of peace and a clear mind. I never understood how people feel more stressed while doing it.

Then again, everyone slows down in their own way and time. We must respect that the best way to do so is the one that works for each individual. Singaporeans' "kiasu" environment, personal circumstances and beliefs have already resulted in a competition to be busy, where the winner is the one who is the busiest. The last thing we want is for slowing down to become another competition.

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CC0001

The Role of Humans in Urban Nature

Toh Yi Sheng Eusebius

The first cue that one is nearing Nanyang Lake is the powerful sound of water crashing. I hear it before I see it—causing me to turn my head and look for the source. As I approach, I see the waterfall. The water reflects light from the sun—giving it a shiny, whitish appearance. Continually rushing down a height of about two stories high, the water seemed relentless in its motion.

I walk up the stairs and approach the lake. As I gain distance from the waterfall, a shift in atmosphere arises. This water body is still—a deep cyan shade takes over the whiteness I previously saw. Ripples here are slow and calm—moving at the pace of a stroll.

The wind picks up. I feel the soft blow of air against my neck. New crests and troughs appear across the lake surface. Leaves rustle in the distance, its volume picking up with the wind's intensity. The tree branches sway in accordance too, the angle of tilt increasing as the wind blows harder.

Amidst all the activity, something eerily still. This thing, located near the side of the lake, is unreactive to all the environmental magic happening around it. It spurts out water at a fixed, mechanical rate, humming in a metallic tone that never changes in pitch or volume. This greyish device does the exact same thing in a dry, repetitive fashion—the same

rate of spurting, the same pattern of water created, the same noise that never varies in frequency or amplitude.

The staleness of the mechanical pump stood in stark contrast to the dynamism of nature. Looking around, I started to see more outliers, all characterised by their motionlessness. Brown nets confined pebbles in position, giving a neat but unchanging layered appearance. Silver hooks were attached tightly to tree trunks, restricting their motion and sway with the wind. Seeing all of this, I realised that human presence is pervasive even in spaces that are supposedly kept natural.

Perhaps all these things do have their purposes. Pumps help to filter and keep water clean, while hooks support frail tree trunks at risk of falling over. Human presence aids in the maintenance of the naturalistic area. Yet, it also seems to interfere with the naturalness of the place—giving the impression that urban nature is merely a poor replica of real nature.

Contemplating about all of this, I realised that humans influence urban nature in different ways. Our presence changes the way urban nature develops—what exactly are the roles we play in shaping our urban green and blue space?

In a study published by *Hydrobiologia: The International Journal of Aquatic Sciences*, Birch and McCaskie (1999) discuss how urban lake managers face a “variety of practical management problems” (p.365). Titled “Shallow Urban Lakes: A Challenge for Lake Management,” the article points out that many lake management problems are “fundamentally ecological” (p.365). An example would be eutrophication whereby nutrients accumulate in the lake, resulting in algae bloom and eventual death of aquatic species. Another issue is leaf litter, which “adds to the accumulation of sediment on the bottom of the lakes and creates a high oxygen demand” (p.366). To counter these problems, “lakes have to be maintained by the mains water supply,” which constantly flushes the system to regulate nutrient content (p.366). Aerators, which help maintain dissolved oxygen levels, need to be installed to aid decompositions of organic matter at the sediment layer.

Birch and McCaskie (1999) point out that much work needs to be done when bringing nature into urban spaces. Because urban nature does not naturally exist, many ecological forces need to be specially curated in order to make the place possible. While nature is traditionally thought of as self-sustaining, the same cannot be said for urban nature as the area is surrounded by skyscrapers. Human intervention is integral to keeping urban nature viable as typical ecological forces which maintain naturalistic environments are simply not present—creating a gap which humans need to fill. This requires considerable effort and investment, bringing about another interesting point on environmental justice.

From an urban planning perspective, Wolch et al., (2014) offer that access to green space is often “highly stratified based on income, ethno-racial characteristics, age, gender, (dis)ability, and other axes of difference” (p.3). Titled “Urban Green Space, Public Health, and Environmental Justice: The Challenge of Making Cities ‘Just Green Enough’”, the article explains that differential access stems from a multitude of reasons “including the philosophy of park design, history of land development, evolving ideas about leisure and recreation, and histories of class and ethno-racial inequality and state oppression” (p.3). The solution to differential access, however, is not to simply build more urban green spaces in less-privileged communities. This is because green spaces “improve attractiveness and public health, making neighbourhoods more desirable,” which in turn push up housing costs (p.4). These higher costs adversely impact lower income families, potentially leading to gentrification whereby original residents get displaced and excluded from the green spaces that were meant to benefit them. Known as the “Urban Green Space Paradox,” this problem highlights the considerations urban planners have when including green space in their designs.

Wolch et al. (2014) highlight that urban nature is not immune from larger societal forces such as socio-economic pressures. These systems shape where and why we put urban nature in some areas but not others. Urban green spaces have significant benefits, which is precisely why people place a higher monetary value on areas with them. Because of this, urban planners should account for unintended consequences like gentrification when including green spaces in city design. The ideal

amount of green space needed should be calculated based on whether the residents will stand to gain more than they lose. Only after careful deliberation will a design be finalised and implemented.

While Birch and McCaskie (1999) talk about the more technical aspects of how humans maintain urban nature, Wolch et al. (2014) zoom out to look at how human systems influence where we put these spaces in our community. Different as they may seem, Birch and McCaskie (1999) and Wolch et al. (2014) share a common thread—urban nature is something that is planned, curated, and carefully designed to exist in a particular location. This fact, while seemingly innocuous, is actually a dire concern for environmentalists because it suggests that urban nature is “fake” nature. Many worry that in so carefully crafting our urban green and blue spaces, we have also unintentionally played the role of destructor, whereby we diminish nature’s essence.

Some may view urban nature as tainted nature, but I think that urban nature merely represents a different form of nature. Granted, urban nature is not untouched nature; it is a domesticated form of nature which ultimately serves human needs. Yet it is not in our interest to change urban nature beyond recognition; we still hope to reap the benefits of nature from urban nature after all. To do this, we minimally still need to preserve the quintessential definition of nature in urban nature. Besides, urban nature goes beyond just preservation; it represents a union between humans and nature whereby we build on each other and create something that would not have existed on its own.

Looking back at Nanyang Lake, I recognise now that it is an urban blue space. It was likely conceived of as a recreational area for stressed-out university students to relax. But beyond that, I am now acutely aware of how much effort it took for me to be able to stand here and enjoy the view. From carefully placed water pumps to the broader economic forces that decided this was a worthwhile investment, I marvelled at how all these forces coalesced into the Nanyang Lake before me. An appreciation of all the work behind the scenes only seemed to intensify the spectacle in front of me—not dampen the experience of nature. I lingered for a moment longer, relishing in its beauty.

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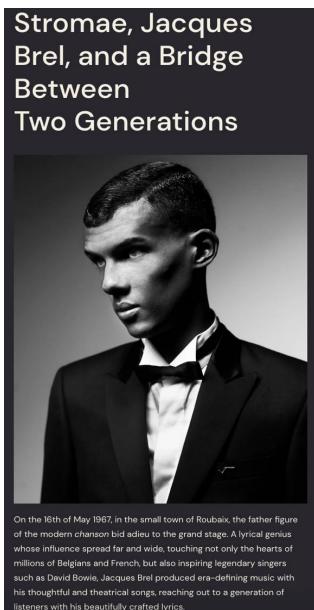
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CC0001

Does How We Write Shape Who We Are?

Jadhav Chaitanya Dhananjay



On the 16th of May 1967, in the small town of Roubaix, the father figure of the modern chanson bid adieu to the grand stage. A lyrical genius whose influence spread far and wide, touching not only the hearts of millions of Belgians and French, but also inspiring legendary singers such as David Bowie, Jacques Brel produced era-defining music with his thoughtful and theatrical songs, reaching out to a generation of listeners with his beautifully crafted lyrics.

Figure 1. A blog post about two French-speaking musicians and their similarities.

The benefits of consistent writing have been well documented by researchers. Studies show that consistent writing often results in a significant improvement in "critical thinking, analysis and inference skills" (Quitadamo & Kurtz, 2007). However, the intimate relation between a writer and their work means that it is only through self-reflection that a writer can understand their evolution. Analysing my writing practices for the course CC0001 - Inquiry and Communication in an Interdisciplinary World provided me with the

The Impact of Thierry Henry

Chaitanya Jadhav Jul 26, 2020 · 9 min read

After an outstanding twenty-year playing career, mercurial forward Thierry Henry entered the coaching world with the aim of emulating the success he achieved as a player.

Following stints as a youth coach at Arsenal and an assistant coach at Belgium, Henry took over the reigns of a struggling AS Monaco from Leonardo Jardim in October 2018.

However, his tenure at his childhood club came to a quick end. He was suspended by the club in January 2019 after a disappointing four wins from twenty games. It was difficult to envision Henry succeeding at Monaco. He inherited a depleted Monaco side with key players lost to transfers and a sizable number of injuries. His lack of experience as a manager led to conflicts with his players, and perhaps his lack of coaching experience prevented him from achieving his vision of replicating the playing style of Guardiola's Barcelona.

After a short hiatus, Henry took over the role of head coach at Montreal Impact in November 2019. The Impact are a team that have not had much success over the course of their history, giving Henry the chance to mold the team as he sees fit, with the goal of making them more competitive in the MLS over the course of his tenure.

Figure 2. An article I wrote for a football website about the management style of Thierry Henry, a famous player turned manager.

opportunity to reflect on my journey as a writer. I want to share my observations in the hope that my peers will be inspired to do the same.

My writing journey began in 2017 when I looked to share my passion for football with others online. I analysed how teams played and published it on websites to share my thoughts with others. This was one of the first experiences that showed me how much I enjoy writing. Over time, I also discovered a passion for the arts and philosophy

and started a blog talking about their links to my personal experiences. Looking back at this change in my target audience and subject, I realised that my writing style changed too.

When writing about football, I used a brief introduction to summarise the contents of my article. Since my articles were published on a football website, readers were naturally more interested in the content. Meanwhile, articles on my blog often had very detailed and elaborate introductions where I looked to craft a narrative that I could explore. My goal was to capture the readers' attention while getting them acquainted with the topic. Figure 2 shows an introductory snippet of an article I wrote analysing the coaching of Thierry Henry, a famous coach.

I realised that my football articles also contained more technical terminology. Football-specific tactical phrases like "counter-pressing" and "half-spaces" were commonly employed in my articles as I looked to succinctly describe how a team plays. The nature of my audience allowed me to use these terms without worrying that they would not understand what I meant. The tone of my articles was factual as I was tasked to review matches without adding my opinion.

On the other hand, the vocabulary I used in my blogs was simpler, as my goal was to make them understandable and accessible. I also tried to add my voice and passion to my blogs by linking my personal experiences to them, highlighting how I discovered these topics and why I found them worth sharing. For example, Figure 1 shows a snippet of

one of my blogs about French music, which was inspired by my experiences in learning the language and how I observed similarities between two francophone musicians, Stromae and Jacques Brel, even though they were active in completely different eras.

Looking back, I found it difficult to believe that I authored both these works, given their stark differences. It felt like each genre expressed a different side of my personality—my football analyses highlighted my logical and analytical thinking, while my blogs reflected my creative personality. Focusing on writing in each genre helped me develop specific skills and nurture different aspects of my writing. However, there was almost no overlap in skills between both genres. Observing these stark differences led me to wonder—to what extent do genre conventions impact the identity of a writer?

Ken Hyland (2015), a respected linguist, believes that genre is an important bridge between individuals and the community they want to share ideas with. For example, academia is used as a tool to "develop relationships" and "reinforce and challenge" communities (Hyland, 2015). Genre gives readers confidence in a work and is a blueprint that writers can use to deliver new ideas in a familiar format.

Hyland (2015) believes that the identity of a writer is influenced by genre, but is also determined by "proximity" and "positioning." Proximity refers to how closely a writer follows pre-existing genre norms, while positioning refers to how writers

choose to stand out within these norms. Writers may have to follow certain norms in a genre, for example, the structure and format, but still are able to express themselves through other means, such as their vocabulary. While writers' identities are in large part determined by the characteristics of a genre, Hyland (2015) believes they can still find their voice and express themselves within these norms.

Hyland's (2015) arguments resonate with me as I have had a similar experience. The football articles I wrote had a pre-defined structure, similar to genres like academia. When I began writing, I referred to other articles and tried to mimic their structure. Over the years, my structure remained unchanged, but as I got more experience with writing, I looked to bring in my voice by using more narrative elements in my analyses to engage the reader, eventually finding my own voice within the constraints that I had to write in.

I also saw characteristics of my analytical writing carry over to my other writing assignments. I do believe that my writing identity was shaped by my football writing experiences. Conversely, the lack of restrictions on my blogs allowed me to explore new writing styles and try techniques that I had not used before. For example, I could use long introductions and narrative elements to set the scene and draw readers in, which was not previously necessary. This freedom allowed me to write exactly how I wanted, improving my skills as a writer. However, some literary experts argue that the converse is true—that a genre is created as a result of similarities between writers. Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro, two celebrated fantasy authors,

presented this argument in an interview (Gaiman, 2015). They believe that a genre is created only when there is enough subject matter to form a characterisable "critical mass" of content. Therefore, genre does not play a role in determining the identity of a writer. Rather, it helps the audience to classify and compare characteristics of a writer's work with their peers (Gaiman, 2015). Genres like literature, for example, only classify a writer's work after it has been published, effectively giving the writer a blank slate to express themselves. Therefore, these genres do not influence a writer's identity in any way.

Gaiman (2015) and Ishiguro also state that genre boundaries can be a hindrance to the progress of literature. In the interview, they note that there is a growing focus on characterising a literary work, rather than attempting to understand the ideas of the author. Genre stigmatisation by members of the literary community also make it difficult for writers to explore new genres. Ishiguro's novel *The Buried Giant* was heavily scrutinised by some members of the literary community as it contained elements of fantasy. He found himself questioning why some readers were so pre-occupied about how his work should be classified, while others said nothing of the matter and enjoyed reading it.

For them, genre serves as nothing more than an arbitrary category used to organise books at bookshops. With this in mind, the writers encourage their peers to explore new ideas and expand the boundaries of literature, regardless of the scrutiny that they may encounter along the way.

This interview shed some light on how genre reflects common characteristics between writers and why it may not always affect a writer's identity. It taught me about the origins of genre and how we classify works over time. I do agree with the sentiments of the writers—I did not feel restricted in any way when writing my blogs. Therefore, we cannot conclude that all genres affect a writer's identity. However, is there any concrete distinction we can use to distinguish between genres that do, and genres that do not?

I went back to my literary works in search of an answer. After looking at my blogs and my football articles, I realised that the genre "element" of my football articles came from its structure, while the genre "element" of my blog came from its content. This led me to realise that we can classify genres into two types—those which are defined by their content, and those which are defined by their conventions. The distinction between them determines their impact on a writer—genres only affect a writer's identity if the genre is characterised by writing conventions.

Genres like academia require writers to present their ideas in a formal, unbiased tone, often with the use of supporting evidence. In these fields, writers have to adapt their writing style, tone and structure to follow these conventions, regardless of the ideas they wish to present. Therefore, their writing identity will ultimately be shaped by these conventions as they continue writing in this field, as noted by Hyland (2015). On the other hand, as stated by Gaiman (2015) and Ishiguro, genres such as literature do not impose these restrictions on a writer, allowing

them to express themselves freely.

This explains why my writing identity was shaped by my experience writing football articles, why the characteristics of my football articles carried over to my other works, and why blogging gave me new perspectives and broadened my horizons as a writer. It was quite interesting to see the impact that genre conventions can have on a writer and to see that such a massive change can often go unnoticed. It makes me wonder about the extent to which genre-specific writing has also influenced my peers. Embarking on this reflective journey helped me to understand how my experiences have shaped my writing. It also motivates me to keep exploring new genres to further develop myself as a writer. I hope it can prompt others to think about how their identities as writers have changed over the years as well.

I believe the easiest way to start this journey of self-reflection would be to begin by looking at the choice of vocabulary used in one's literary works. This provides a suitable base to easily compare and contrast works of similar or differing nature. Then ask the question—why did I choose to write in this manner? Was it of my own accord, or because it was mandated? This in turn allows us to determine the nature of the genre we write in and understanding how it has shaped us, the writer.

I have always maintained that writing is a beautiful means of moulding one's thoughts in an expressible manner. However, coming to this conclusion allowed me to truly appreciate the exchange that occurs between the writer and his medium.

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CC0001

The Reality of Realities: Virtual Spaces in a Physical World

Ho Wei Jen, Daryn (Daryn Ho)

The golden hour dawned on a Tuesday evening. Green hues were majestically highlighted by the evening sun as they intertwined concrete and metal. Wafts of home-cooked meals trickled through the relatively undisturbed air from the windows of surrounding flats. The air was still, but far from stale. Common was the sight of greying heads and wrinkled skin, strolling around with no rush or worry. Innocent squeals of excitement would occasionally pierce the serenity, but they were far and few between. The fitness corner was empty at first, but soon filled up with retirees. The playgrounds, however, did not echo a similar trend. The space normally credited as the loudest source of noise was eerily empty.

Almost 20 years ago, this very space was the conduit for unprecedented chaos; high-pitched crying over a scraped knee, uncontrollable laughter coming from the apex of the swings, continuous screaming accompanying the scampering of bare feet. Mini bicycles would be strewn along the pathways as footballs whizzed back and forth. The chaos I became accustomed to while growing up was absent, indeed uncomfortably so. Many of my generation would attest that, beyond the facade of chaotic fun, there were intangible benefits. Values such as teamwork, cooperation, resilience, and grit

were instilled. Friendships were forged as we, unknowingly, were introduced to the concept of camaraderie. Psychomotor skills were sharpened as physical exertion and coordination were plenty. A localised community, or “Kampong,” was thus born. In fact, these values were what gave the “Kampong” its “Kampong Spirit”—a colloquial term that the older generation would be well familiar with, and one that they would claim is absent in modern, digitalised Singapore.

Virtual spaces have become more popular in recent years, with Facebook announcing the development of the metaverse in 2021. The metaverse is a virtual world, where users can socialise and live their lives through virtual avatars, thus promising unlimited possibilities with none of the worldly limitations—almost as if it were a more attractive alternative to the physical world.

As I reflect on the emptiness of the park, I cannot help but credit the success of technology for shifting the priorities of the younger generation, and society in general. In the physical world, we are able to achieve great feats when we work together in a community, and thus the “Kampong Spirit” is both cultivated through our endeavours and also imperative to our successes. In the metaverse,

none of this is truly necessary. A single person can build an entire city or play against Artificial Intelligent opponents in a game of football. The disparity lies in the fact that humans are physical beings, and the limitations that come with being physical oftentimes necessitate the formation of societies. Virtual reality offers a reality that does not require the human element, and the need for communal spaces that come with it.

As such, with the advancements in virtual reality and the increasing prevalence of digitalisation, how then does the development of virtual spaces affect the relevancy of physical spaces?

Janet Murray (2020) argues in *Virtual/reality: How to Tell the Difference* that, conceptually, virtual reality requires one to be immersed in an illusionary environment, the basis of which fundamentally negates its standing as a “real” reality. Murray (2020) further elaborates that such “immersion is a delicate state that is easily disrupted” and is done through threshold objects—physical apparatus such as Virtual Reality headsets, hand-held controllers or even sensors mounted on our bodies—which help bring us over the boundary between the physical world and the virtual world. These objects cue our consciousness of our entry into a human-authored reality in which virtual spaces reside, helping us “constrain our attention to what we see within the headset, and what we can interact with via the hand controllers, while tuning out other sensory input and overlooking contradictions in the representations before us” (Murray, 2020). The technological limitations in this aspect manifest in experiential deficits in virtual spaces. In this sense, we never actually forget our presence in the real

world, making virtual reality just a subset of a much larger and complex physical reality of lived experiences; one that is dependent on, and can only exist within, the other. This view inevitably affects our perception of what is real and what is not, which inherently lowers the value of virtual reality in this realm we exist in. If anything, these threshold objects expose the ambiguity between physical and mental states and highlight the delicate extent to which we can really be immersed in virtual spaces.

In part, Murray (2020) emphasises on the limited experience we can have in the “immersive cocoon” that virtual reality provides. On the other hand, she claims that this cocoon of immersion is not unique to virtual reality but has long been observed in conventional media such as television, movies and novels. In using this point, Murray (2020) drives her opinion that virtual reality only becomes “real through the active creation of belief by inducing and satisfying specific intentional gestures of engagement”—meaning it depends more on our intentional buy-in of the reality than anything else, and as soon as we withdraw our participation, the illusion vanishes. If this is so, then virtual reality cannot be a substitute for physical spaces any more than other forms of captivating media, be it books, films or role-playing games.

It does seem true that if virtual spaces were to eventually replace physical spaces, we have to consider if virtual reality and virtual spaces are, or can potentially become, direct substitutes that are on par with physical reality and physical spaces. However, they are less a threat to physical spaces than we think, to the extent that we are not able to gaze upon the foreseeable future. Interestingly, if

we were to agree that the realness of one reality is dependent on our belief more than the medium it is presented in, then we could argue the opposite. The treatment of reality, whether virtual or physical, thus necessitates a deeper look into how virtuality has influenced our perception of reality to the extent that it may come to be a matter of life and death.

David Chalmers (2017) expounds on this view in 'The Virtual and the Real,' arguing that virtual reality has complete power in providing us an equivalent reality. Chalmers (2017) explains that virtual reality should not be considered a sub-par reality, but rather, one that is as real, as valuable and as non-illusory as the physical world we live in, as long as we are in agreement with it. According to the theory of structuralism, it matters less the actual facts of experience but that, as Chalmers (2017) highlights, "Physical reality can be characterised by its causal structure" (Chalmers, 2017, p.34); that is, the cause-and-effect relationship between us and the objects, or people, around us determine our past, present and future encounters with the "real." For example, when we push a mug across the table, the mug gets pushed. We are the cause, and the moving of the mug is the effect. A cognitive experience is created through this simple interaction—an experience that we not only see or perceive in our minds. Referencing constructivism—a theory that suggests that reality is determined by our mind's interpretation of experiences, and the meanings we individually attach to them—Chalmers (2017) also contends that it is our cognitive interpretation of experiences that determines the "realness" of a world. As such, the amalgamation of these experiences and the associated cognitive interpretations make up the causal structure that is

present in our world. As technology evolves, this causal structure explores the possibility that cognitive interpretation replaces the physical necessity of the universe that revolves around the individual self. At least theoretically, there is nothing stopping virtual spaces from creating their own laws of experience that are on par with physical spaces, but only as long as these needs are seen as equal.

In essence, Chalmers (2017) argues for the equal status of virtual and physical spaces, and that we can, and should, treat one to be as real as the other. On one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has already given the world a glimpse of the unlimited possibilities virtual spaces have to offer, and the benefits it brought to businesses (in the form of virtual meetings and the ability to save on office costs by shifting workspaces to homes), social circles (in the convenience and efficiency of virtual meet-ups) and the Earth (in the cutting down of greenhouse gas emissions and pollutions caused by travel and daily commutes). On the other hand, the attractiveness of the virtual world and its unlimited possibilities also seem to, by default, cast a gloomy shadow on the future of physical spaces.

Although both Murray (2020) and Chalmers (2017) provide strong arguments, they seem to lack the philosophical holism required to address the experiential deficits in virtual reality—one that considers the complex connection between metaphysics and our ability to be immersed, which encompasses psychological, physiological, emotional, and societal factors that inherently affect humankind's inertia to change. After the physical and virtual wall falls away, there still seems to be an

emotional element that is lacking—one that is perhaps more than just rooted in memories but grounded in physical space and time. This, however, is highly subjective and not consistently quantifiable. Yet, it is a revelation, if nothing else, that the human mind is far more affected by emotional attachments and an experiential bias than we think, which is ironically exposed when we go down the rabbit hole of the virtual world.

Any comparison between the virtual and physical world cannot be reduced to simple logic, quantifiable arguments or even the capabilities of new technology. The impending transition from the physical to greater dependency on the virtual would inherently require a philosophically equivalent experience, which is more than just about the extent of our immersion or the “realism” of experiences available, but the way we perceive—and how we define—what is real and what is not to us. This human element is thus far missing from the algorithm of the virtual world but might also change as technology advances and society evolves. Interestingly, if the realness of a space is confined to our perception of it, the answer to the question on the relevancy of physical spaces actually lies more in our willingness to embrace technology, and the extent to which we might even compromise for it—by accepting certain experiential deficits as part of the new “reality.” If so, we might run the risk of losing sight altogether of what makes reality “real.” By accepting reality as is in order to suit technology,

rather than vice versa, creates a certainty about physical laws that go beyond the capabilities of technology itself to the deliberate manipulation of our collective if not also individual realities.

In considering the substitutability of virtual spaces, the far-reaching implications result in a thorough examination of presiding laws of the state including societal priorities as influenced by human mentality, psychological stigma, childhood development and finally government intervention (especially so in Singapore). What society values and is willing to forego—whether it is the “Kampong Spirit” in favour of economic efficiency or otherwise—will vastly affect the stability of our day-to-day reality to the extent that a virtual future impinges on existing belief systems that determine how we react to different situations. Yet another important factor would be the demographics of users—an important factor in the consideration of physical or actual interactions. One thing I do know, for as short-lived or infrequent as they were, the occasional squeals of excitement from the children seemed to rekindle fond memories and bring a strange warmth to my heart—a warmth that no virtual space could bring.

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CC0001

The Journey to Find Wildness in Parks

Kwek Ee Chern

The undisturbed water shone a brilliant emerald in the afternoon sun. The light reflected beautiful stone arcs over the water. Picturesque gazebos were strategically placed to provide respite from the heat. Violet wisterias punctuated the virescent foliage and willows swayed softly in the wind. I casually strolled through the park, taking in the sights and sounds of nature. The air was fresh, and I was reinvigorated from my tiring day of work. Fresh sights of grand trellises and the observation tower that majestically stood in the center of the park burned itself into my memory. I let loose a satisfied grin as I lost myself in thoughts of the next amazing sight. A roar abruptly resounded across the park; my ears instantaneously perked up as adrenaline rushed through my veins. I was suddenly pulled back to reality and I immediately found myself incapable of ignoring the sounds around me. The incessant buzzing of crickets and the occasional clucking of chickens added variation to the constant droning of the road. I scurried desperately around the park to find solace but to no avail. The park was sandwiched between an expressway and the main road. The screech of tires and the squeal of horns pervaded the whole park. Deflated, I departed, my initial excitement and joy nowhere to be found.

My displeasure was immense, and my day was

ruined. I was anticipating a relaxing stroll through nature only to be interrupted by the hustle and bustle of the city. Looking back to my walk in the park, I realised that you could spy hulking apartments and busy streets from the corner of my eye, the hustle and bustle of the city never left my ears. I started to question the nature of parks. Did I truly leave the concrete jungle? Or was I still in it? The path was paved with concrete and the vegetation was carefully groomed. The breathtaking gazebos and landmarks were engineered to be scenic, and the entire park was sculpted by human hands.

Singapore is famous as the Garden City, and rightfully so, as you can easily spot greenery in every corner of our city. If greenery was all that was required to experience wildness, it would be a simple task to find wildness in Singapore. However, the sounds of traffic and the sight of buildings remind us to continue our rat race. The constant rhythm and conformity of evenly spaced trees by the roadside, a parody of the streetlamps that light up our streets, leaves no room for reflection. Where can we experience wildness then? Is it possible to experience wildness in a manicured park?

Matthew F. Child (2021) defines wildness to be “the self-willed, spontaneous and creative properties

that emerge from functioning ecosystems," in his journal article titled, "Wildness, Infinity and Freedom" (p.2). He connects the pursuit of happiness and spiritual wellness, to biodiversity via wildness. Wildness exists in both artificial and natural places, albeit natural ones create more varied patterns and interactions. While wild affordances do not provide direct instruction, it is an object of fascination that restores and focuses our attention. As everyone reacts differently to affordances, wildness creates heterogeneity of experiences and provides "unknownness" that cannot be reproduced by artificial means. This "unknownness" lets us believe in our capacity for change and drives our search for meaning (Child, 2021). Wild spaces function as a space which "simultaneously represent, disrupt and transform—that are other to establishment," and enables adaptability by "acting as transgressive spaces where it is possible to think differently, be differently, and engage in the practices of freedom" (Child, 2021, p.5). We learnt from Child (2021) that wildness leads to "unknownness" which enables people to enjoy themselves by providing a venue to behave freely.

As "unknownness" is what allows people to embrace change and experience spiritual wellness, it is more worthwhile to determine whether "unknownness" can be found in parks. Child (2021) claims that wildness can exist in fully domesticated ecosystems, but the "unknownness" cannot be reproduced. However, we cannot neglect the feelings of immersion and wonder I felt when I first entered Toa Payoh Town Park, I had experienced joy from my first visit to the Park, but I had lost that immersion after noticing the city around me again.

The Park's ecosystem is micromanaged by human hands, meticulously selecting the interactions and scenery within the Park, leaving nothing but a static and unchanging environment. The opportunity for spontaneous interactions and change to emerge from functioning ecosystems is lost and "unknownness" is diminished. It is impossible to determine if "unknownness" is unreproducible from only my park-going experience, so it is essential to look into other situations where "unknownness" can be found. While parks had left me spellbound, it may not be the place to where "unknownness" truly shines, considering that it is a place for many of our routines. Where else can we find manmade "unknownness" then?

In the *Journal of Travel Research*, a team of three researchers, Ponsignon et al. (2020) examined how escapism and psychic distance affects the hedonic value of tourists. The study used surveys to empirically classify the satisfaction and perceptions of foreign and domestic tourists and determined that international tourists are more satisfied than domestic ones. The team introduced the idea of hedonic value, "the notion that consumers derive particular benefits from an experience that they perceive as fun, enjoyable, multisensorial, emotional and exciting" (Ponsignon et al., 2020, pp. 1-4). They theorised that it is more likely for foreign tourists to gain a "tourist mindset," that they become more open to new ideas and more accepting of failure and participate in activities that produce greater hedonic benefits. Tourism is a method of temporary escape from their daily lives and foreign tourists, being far from home, are more likely to experience greater escapism which lead to greater hedonic value. The team states that escapism does

not directly cause satisfaction but rather influences it by raising hedonic value (Ponsignon et al. 2020). The magnitude of escapism is affected by the “psychic distance,” which is the novelty and the difference in culture from their own country (Ponsignon et al., 2020). Their analysis establishes how “psychic distance” raises escapism which causes foreign tourists to be more satisfied with their travelling experience.

Wild spaces can immerse and enclose you within a different world—one of greenery and wildness. In our daily lives, we scurry about on concrete in the city but wander on grass in nature. Wild spaces look vastly different from city areas, and most people visit wild spaces without the intent to work. This creates a sense of incongruity with city life and introduces “psychic distance” stemming from the difference in values between relaxation and work. By being mentally distant from our daily lives, parks serve as a refreshing source of escapism and improve our wellbeing and satisfaction akin to how Ponsignon and his team have illustrated how escapism raises our satisfaction from our travelling experiences through what is unfamiliar (Ponsignon et al. 2020). Child (2021) explained how natural wildness provides “unknownness” which improves mental wellbeing and happiness. We can see that natural wildness and “psychic distance” are similar in a myriad of ways: both contribute to escapism and thus improve satisfaction and happiness. Uncoincidentally, wildness and “psychic distance” give people the opportunity to mediate and reflect on their life and wellbeing. Wild spaces allow people to behave freely and unfettered (Child, 2021), just as how a “tourist mindset” lets people behave more amenably and unrestrictedly (Ponsignon et al.,

2020). This is due to the importance on production of unfamiliar and unexpected experiences in “psychic distance” and wildness. While a typical neighbourhood park would provide “psychic distance” from the contrast in our daily lives, it would diminish as the contrast becomes increasingly normalised from consistent and routine visits to the park. “Unknownness” then becomes the key to refresh and reset our park-going experience and continue to reflect our mental psyche.

Many parks in Singapore have enraptured me with exceptional feelings of “unknownness” and wanderlust. Toa Payoh Town Park exhibits a retro Chinese aesthetic, Tampines Eco-green goes all out in keeping a natural minimalistic layout while Sembawang Hot Spring Park leverages on its natural hot springs. In these Parks, at first, it might seem that the human intervention is impeding the wildness and thus “unknownness” of the park, but it is precisely the meticulous design and considerations of architects that produced a novel and unexpected park that sparks joy in its visitors. If it is impossible to recreate “unknownness” through natural wildness, then perhaps it is time to turn our eyes towards the construction of interesting and unexpected experiences.

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CC0001

The Canteen: Through the Lens of Nostalgia

Tan Ding Jiang

"Boy, here's your coffee. Nice to see you again." The canteen vendor handed me the Teh C Kosong, a drink that I have ordered every day for two years of my time in junior college. Spending a total of six years in the same campus in secondary school, I had a certain affinity for the place I spent much of my formative years in.

With my tea, I sat at a table overlooking the football field. I smelled the grass after rain, felt the humidity on my face, and soaked in the stillness of the overcast clouds. It was three in the afternoon, a strange hour when students had either left the school or were in the midst of their extra-curricular activity when the school was strangely static but not empty.

My tea cooled under the steady whirring of the huge fans overhead, with each stroke of wind providing an escape from an otherwise warm afternoon. The evaporated milk complemented the tea subtly such that I would not be able to taste either alone, only leaving the squeaky mouthfeel of tea after I put down my drink.

I looked upon the field with the frisbee team practicing, brimming with youthful energy. The white disc almost blended with the monochromic

sky; its motion so smooth it seemed unnatural. I was reminded of the tough training that my team underwent together in the same field; now, we are in different schools and our life trajectory is vastly different.

Students walked past where I sat. Some were alone, some with friends. Some clutched laptops close to their chests, some slung their backpack hastily over one shoulder. Most wore the faculty colours of red, blue, yellow, and green. A tinge of bittersweet emotions swept me as I took the last sip of my tea.

The most striking thing about everything I saw, everything I felt was how familiar it was, yet it elicited deeply visceral emotions that seemed too nebulous to pin down with a singular word; nostalgia, wistfulness, longing, elegy were all encompassed. This left me wondering: what draws us to familiar places that we no longer belong to, and cannot belong to anymore?

In an article in *The Atlantic*, "The Psychology of Home: Why Where You Live Means So Much," Julie Beck (2011) asserts that despite modern mobility, humans tend to emphasize a sense of belonging to a physical space. Memories are elicited by tangible

places and when one revisits a place they used to call home, they revert to a person they once were. This is not unlike how visiting the school that I spent my adolescence in reminds me of my adolescent ambition and naïvety. She then extends this argument to assert that home is an extension of a self into one's surrounding given that we tie who we are temporally to where we are, similar to how I view my school as part of my identity and lived experience.

Beck (2011) helps to tackle the significance of familiar places to us. Volatility is commonplace in modern society and dynamism prized in the modern humans, yet we still cling to beacons of constancy. Familiar places are no different, especially those that are synonymous with phases in life and the formation of who we are in the present. These places are therefore an extension of our identity. We naturally associate these places with the people we were in those slivers of time and the emotions closely tied to that phase in life.

The natural question that follows would be what happens after one leaves the place they call home? I have since graduated from my school and moved on, and my identity's association with the school has since gradually turned into occasional wistful longing.

In an article in *Medical News Today*, "Why Do We Need Nostalgia," Maria Cohut (2021) explores the shift in perception of nostalgia from an affliction to a source of strength. She cites the common notion that nostalgia was a common form of depression or pathophysiology that needed medical attention. Only more recently, nostalgia has been agreed upon

to ultimately come together to form a "constructive narrative," (Cohut, 2021). Cohut cites academic Krystine Batcho who proclaims that nostalgia is an integral part of self-identity, drawing us back to where we came from and what is important to us, not unlike how I treasure the youthful boldness I embodied back as a teenager. She also cites Andrew Abeyta's study on nostalgia ameliorating solitude's toll taken on the human psyche, providing solace in cherished memories, just as how the happiest moments I had spent training in that field resurface in the mundane days since.

Cohut (2021) then assists us in exploring the value of the emotions elicited and the draw it has on us. Establishing that these familiar places are a spatial representation of a temporally distant version of ourselves, it is important to realise that interpreters of this association are still our present selves. Therein lies a clear juxtaposition of one's current emotional state, current state of identity, current state of life as opposed to that of one's past self. The memories cued by the familiarity of such a place reinforce this dissonance of identity, which is, in turn, interpreted rather viscerally. Reverting to my school canteen, the familiarity of the sights, sounds, and smells stitched a reflection of myself in my formative years, and with this as a foil, it is now clear that I am a vastly different person, with a vastly different perspective. The draw of a tangible and familiar place is therefore the connectedness, evoked by nostalgia. In spite of the fact that I can no longer belong, the sense of rootedness it provides gives me succour in especially turbulent times: an assurance that I am still inexplicably tethered to my journey thus far.

Reverting to the original question at hand, Beck (2011) emphasises our perceived significance of familiar places, while Cohut (2021) affirms the importance of its accompanying nostalgia in the human psyche. Building on what the two authors have helped us establish, we are left with the last gap in our attempt to explain the draw of familiar places: the intrinsic value of familiar places. Beck posited that familiar places remind us of our past versions of ourselves, whereas Cohut established how nostalgia is integral to identity formation. The corollary that follows is that familiar places are conduits of an essential part of self-actualisation: the reconciliation of one's changing identity. Familiar places present us with a stark contrast between our past and present selves, inviting us to choose to either commit to one of two, or to reconcile the dissonance. To remain rooted to one's value system, past convictions, and journey thus far, while not discounting one's recent experiences, emotions, and discoveries, is to allow for growth emotionally and intellectually.

The malleability of our identities could come in one of two ways. It could go unnoticed which would eventually lead to the further dissolution of our core markers of self, or it could be overwhelming to attempt to solidify our shifting sense of self. The memories evoked by familiar places remarkably solve both these problems, highlighting how much we have changed when we forget, but reminding us of the best of ourselves when we get overwhelmed. Cued by the nostalgia-filled canteen, my current self that valued stability and certainty was juxtaposed to my past self that valued ambition and idealism. The

reconciliation lies in the invitation to pick the best of my conflicting temporal identities, where I chose to preserve my cautiously thorough way of approaching challenges from my current self and the boldness in ambition from my past self. With this reconciliation, I can be assured that I have grown with my new experiences, and at the same time, I have not strayed from the values I held onto as the bright-eyed student I was once in this school. Therefore, in places we are reminded of who we once were, we decide on who we can be.

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CC0001

A Battle Between Paint and Pixels

Wong Li Ying

Havelock Road is quiet in the afternoon as passers-by dock into the refuge of air-conditioned shophouses. Nestled in Lionheart Art Studio, I slump into my seat, throwing a critical eye on the vivid colours that I carefully rendered in distinctive brushstrokes. *Cadmium orange*. *Pyrrole red*. Mixed with a dash of *phthalo green*. The lyrical paint names seem to lunge out of the paint tubes, inviting me to a round of tango around the gaunt easels.

The occasional gentle air-conditioned breeze sent the newspaper rustling in displeasure at being pinned down by my hefty canvas. Exchanging a look of commiseration with my friend, we took a brief respite from our respective canvases. Hers covered in pixels, and mine in thick impasto layers of paint. Paintbrushes and palette knives sprawl lazily across the table, a stark contrast against her sole Apple pencil that houses a myriad of virtual painting tools.

“Tap...tap...tap...,” the sound of her Apple pencil against the glass surface of the iPad echoes through the studio. Within a split second, her uneven lines and clashing colour palette retired to their original state, just with a simple tap of the “undo” button. Seconds turn to minutes as I furiously scrape my mistakes away with a cloth at every wrong brushstroke, wrong flick of the wrist, wrong

angle of my palette knife. Even the squawking pigeons at the windowsill seem to be mocking me. Looking around the studio, I sigh silently. Jet-black computers and whirring machines tower over the feeble paint brushes, their shadows short yet ominous. Only a small nook caters to those who still favour the physical paintbrush.

I twist open a tube of *ultramarine blue* paint, the sharp smell of chemicals prancing freely across the room, as I felt the weight of Mona Lisa’s gaze from the wall. Not the actual piece, of course, but a photo of the original in the Louvre. This was a striking reminder of technological domination in the art. Increasingly, we see 3D printers and Artificial Intelligence (AI) revolutionise the traditional arts scene, creating ground-breaking pieces that challenge the boundaries of artistic perception. This prompts me to ponder—to what extent can traditional art survive the onslaught of greater digitalisation and technological advancements in society today?

Today’s society witnesses the inevitable domination of AI in our lives, from cancer-detecting technology in healthcare to data analysts in national security. In *AI is Blurring the Definition of an Artist*, Elgammal (2019) argues that AI-created art has become increasingly popular as more artists ride the

technological wave. This highlights the threat of traditional artists being replaced. However, Elgammal (2019) asserts that machines will not displace artists since AI is merely a tool for artists to wield. He also likens AI to photography when it was first introduced into the art scene. He claims that AI artworks are “just imitations—with a twist—of pre-curated inputs.” The word “just” suggests that there is something more in the artistic imagination that is lost, even when the artist’s voice intervenes through stories based on human inspiration. Despite its ability to create appealing pieces, it is trapped in a space that appears to exist without social contact and human experiences. Ironically, AI art has a voice that is otherwise dismissed because it is produced through repetition and probability, rather than originality.

If AI-created art is a mere modification of the painting guides that artists input into the machine, there is an obvious lack of authenticity on AI’s part. Yet, despite numerous images of portraits made available, AI can surprisingly end up producing a slew of deformed faces (Rasgaitis, 2021). Unlike photography, where one still has control over the final product through adjusting the lighting and exposure, the degree of autonomy artists cedes using AI technologies is multifold. The autonomy claimed by Elgammal (2019) that artists have over their art, even with powerful AI technologies at their disposal is therefore just an illusion. This implies that AI can transcend beyond imitation to create art pieces that reflect its voice.

“Inspiring” and “communicative” are common praises for AI-created art (Aue, 2019). Digitised art

made from 3D printers and creative adversarial networks are a breath of fresh air for the masses. Changing consumer preferences have inflated the demand for AI-created paintings, to the point where “Portrait of Edmond Belamy,” an AI-created artwork, was sold for a whopping \$432,500. Indeed, the future of AI-created artworks fetching hefty prices could pressure traditional artists to explore AI mediums to bring home the bacon. As more artists gravitate towards machines, the loss of traditional painting methods might be inevitable.

Beyond methods of producing art, technology has also dominated the consumption of art. Today, immersive and interactive museums draw attention away from traditional art institutions. If traditional art remains nestled in traditional art institutions, they may soon be forgotten.

In “Van Gogh Experiences: Immersive Art in the Covid Era,” Teukolsky (2021) posits that immersive art is challenging the future of traditional art’s value and spectatorship. From her perspective, this is especially so since novelty always reigns in the arts; most viewers are generally attracted to something unique. The article claims that immersive art experiences provide new, yet complex aesthetic experiences that “transcend mere kitsch” (Teukolsky, 2021, p.2). With its careful curation of music, scent, and sculptures that fragment light and colour playing directly at the viewers’ sensorium, immersive museums clearly challenge accusations of being kitsch. Unlike mainstream museums, audience involvement in this performance-like exhibit is emphasised.

Kitsch art is considered to be poor in taste due to its excessive garishness, yet some viewers enjoy it because of its irony. Immersive museums can transcend mere kitsch because of their ability to provide transformative experiences such that viewers claim that they are stepping inside a painting, much like in Alice in Wonderland. In every nook, immersive museums offer experiences that are rare to witness in inert paintings in traditional art museums. These performance-like exhibits seem to be made possible with more advanced technology used to create art. While Teukolsky (2021) argues that novelty always reigns in the arts, as evident in how the spectatorship of immersive museums rival traditional ones, it does not necessarily imply a total replacement of traditional art institutions. Novelty is only able to capture people's attention in the short term. Hence, only time will determine whether experiences considered novel today will truly weigh in with traditional art museums.

Such new immersive experiences suggest a paradigm shift in how contemplation is practised. No longer are we active viewers of art, exercising mindfulness and stillness as we ponder over inert paintings in quiet museums. It may appear paradoxical, but ironically, some argue that our active hands-on participation in consuming art has made us more of a subject than an actor. We are more involved in the artwork but less an active interpreter of the aesthetic event which Teukolsky (2021) suggests requires a staged performance or *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a "total work of art" (p.19). However, there lacks critical distance between

viewers and the artwork, as immersive experiences leave little to the imagination.

In technologically created art, an artist's message tends to be more heavily foregrounded. Unlike traditional ways of appreciating art where the meaning of art is sometimes left to interpretation, immersive exhibits are more audience-centred. Yet, these exhibits are not unique in themselves, in being designed to elicit certain thoughts and feelings of the audience. For instance, in Munch's depiction of his Anxiety Disorder in *The Scream*, animated psychotic patterns pair with blaring sirens of emergency code beeps in a painting aimed at shocking or surprising viewers. In this way, many artists have attempted to create art that rejects existing forms, subjects, and styles, while simultaneously making it appealing, a hypothesis that psychologist Colin Martindale proposes based on a divergent theory of the creative process (Elgammal, 2019). This process boils down to the intuitive understanding that ground-breaking art is more likely to arouse viewers and capture attention through novel creations.

Yet, as technology infiltrates as a type of medium for artists and a method of consumption for viewers, there is fear that digitised art limits the imagination and polarises views. There is simply no diversity of voices. Despite changing art consumption patterns, most traditional museum directors move away from the norm of museums with an air of hushed contemplation towards one that brims with vibrancy and interactivity.

Both Elgammal (2019) and Teukolsky (2021) suggest that, historically, the dichotomy between traditional art and digitised art made us perceive that we had to choose between using technology or otherwise. However, this dichotomy is an illusion. Digitised art like AI and immersive art museums have the potential to transform art in a new era, but the stakes are not just technological. The adequacy of this generation's artistic voices requires overcoming the dichotomy between more established forms of art and emerging art like AI because this might hinder creativity in the long run when, as Teukolsky (2021) notes, this only increases distrust for "an art that's valued for its palpable beauty and hits of pleasure, rather than for its high-culture status" (p.19). While we must take Teukolsky's (2021) argument that novelty always reigns in the arts with regard to art experiences with a pinch of salt, her argument might still hold vis-à-vis audience engagement.

Indeed, art curators and museum directors can no longer afford to ignore the voices of the masses. Technology is essential for artists to amplify their voices amidst an impending AI domination. For artists living in a time of real tension between traditional and digitised art, whether meaningful art will be produced with a wooden brush or otherwise, requires challenging the premise of art being elitist or, as Teukolsky (2021) puts it, "the worshipful, high-culture aura of the museum cordoning off the masses" (p.19). Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Teukolsky, 2021) once exposed prejudices in art appreciation, consequently evoking new difficulties in qualifying and quantifying art that can stand the test of time.

If anything, the necessity of harmony through the influence of traditional art processes remains evident in a technologically driven world. However, instead of important exhibitions residing in high-end institutions where only the upper echelons of society have access to, the focus now is on increasing the accessibility of art. AI offers a way to further overcome boundaries created by an inherently elitist artistic community that major art museums continue to serve by providing the means to derive identification and validity through deep learning. In this way, van Gogh's *Sunflowers* for instance could attract more viewers by capturing the complex mixture of happiness and high confidence despite being impossible for a machine to evoke first-hand. The future of AI art lies in understanding audiences' emotions, which is crucial in selecting elements that harmonise rather than clash, a selection moreover that requires the human hand. What awaits us is a kaleidoscope of senses resulting from increasingly animated artworks that unabashedly aim to appeal to the masses.

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CC0001

An Art of Not Preserving Arts

Bernard Lesley Efendy

Fort Canning Park has established itself as a prominent landmark due to its historical significance in Singapore. Along one of the hillsides lies Sang Nila Utama Garden, one of the nine historical gardens in 2019 by National Parks Board. Upon entering the location, visitors are immediately greeted with lush plantations, coupled with the clear water of the small, archaic stone ponds teeming with aquatic floras, which portray the royal gardens around the 14th century. Warm, welcoming chirps of birds can be heard from the tall, dense trees overlooking the hill above. The pleasant aroma produced by the slightly-damp colourful flowers further enhances the beauty of this garden. From afar, one can see two 5-meter-tall brick-like structures covered with overgrown vines standing firmly on both sides of the entrances. This so-called “split gate” is one of the hallmarks of the garden, taking its inspiration from architecture in the Majapahit kingdom, which occupied and thus influenced the cultural ambit of early Singapore (Figure 1).

Statues and potteries crafted from stone are also a prominent feature, which line up symmetrically on both sides of the garden. Such features expressively depict the old artistic craftsmanship, such as plant-

inspired engravings that were prevalent in Singapore culture around the 14th century. Small cracks and crevices started to riddle the leaf-like pattern on the surface of the potteries as they withstand the heavy wind and palpable heat of



Figure 1. The Split Gate

Singapore every day.

While entering the garden, my attention was suddenly diverted to a headless statue resembling

a bird near the entrance (Figure 2). Upon closer inspection, a huge gap filled with a white glue-like substance can be seen dividing the lower half of the head and the torso, which signifies that the object had once been broken before and the reparation process has been initiated. Nevertheless, the upper half of the head is still nowhere to be seen after the restoration, which may, unfortunately, damage the overall appearance of the statue permanently.



Figure 2. The 'headless' bird

On the far opposite end of the entrance stands an old large octagonal-shaped brick pavilion, in the midst of which, a beautiful orchid blooming with its white flowers is present. Nonetheless, unusual yellow and black striped hazard lines arranged in



Figure 3. The barricaded orchid

web-like structure barricades the vicinity, effectively creating a wall that hinders visitors' access to the flower (Figure 3).

Considering such irreparable damage to the bird statues occurred in just 2.5 years, it is highly unlikely that the force of nature alone, such as erosion is the only one to blame. Human action may be the one that accelerated deformations to art forms across this site. The hazard lines taped inside one of its main attractions further emphasise the measure against unwanted and potentially malicious activity, like the incident in 2014 where police arrested a woman who damaged the world's largest moving sculpture Kinetic Rain at Terminal 1 Changi Airport by climbing over a railing and then disentangling the wire of the moving sculpture. In light of many similar art-related incidents, why do some people deliberately destroy beautiful forms of art?

Bhati and Pearce (2016) assert that the motivation behind art destruction is more than merely "a conscious decision of perpetrators." Instead, art vandalism is a result of opportunity, rather than it being preconceived (Bhati & Pearce, 2016). Hence, they believe that environmental circumstances may trigger destructive behaviour. For example, the lack of environmental attributes in the vicinity, such as physical barricades and surveillance systems may subconsciously prompt one's urge to vandalise, as they would have a higher chance of getting away with little repercussions. Moreover, they also highlight the importance of early detection and rectification of "minor disorders," such as tiny graffiti, and surface defacement. The existence of even the slightest defacement on a sculpture, for instance, may encourage vandals to do more damage with increasing severity. With the ever-

growing number of such vandalism, the destruction of art objects would eventually be perceived by more and more people as “normal” there. A further surge in the frequency and salience of vandalism is then inevitable, causing significant damage to art objects.

Bhati and Pearce (2016) here highlighted the reason for art destructive that is often overlooked, which is the environmental factor. In the wake of vandalism, vandals are usually the sole perpetrator to be blamed. When carrying out their destructive act, vandals are thought to have the “innate tendencies” to destroy art forms solely for the sake of their thrill and entertainment. Some people indeed possess such traits; however, this trait may be dormant, meaning that it needs to be triggered first before it shows up. Bhati and Pearce (2016), therefore, believe environmental factors should be further taken into consideration since it plays a major role in triggering vandalistic behaviour. Hence, the perpetrator itself should not entirely be accountable for the destruction of art. Rather, the opportunity provided by the environment is the reason why some people destroy art.

The emphasis on resolving the environmental factor, even to the tiniest “disorder” seemingly suggests that art destruction is such a massive problem. Indeed, the destruction of art is always assumed to be harmful and damaging. Now, art destruction is still regarded as taboo, and many believe that preservation is the only way to treasure the creativity within art objects. However, in “Against Moral Right,” Adler (2009) argues against art preservation by opposing the “special right” given solely to art objects. Art is often portrayed to

have a “magical connection” to its creators as if “hurting the piece will hurt the artist as if you were sticking pins in a voodoo doll (p.269).” Without signing any contract, the artist seems to have control over what you can do to their artwork even after he/she has sold it. Modifying art is, therefore, viewed as an act of disrespecting the original creator; hence, unjustifiable. Adler (2009), however, questions the fundamental basis of such “authorship.” She argues that the special right of art “threatens art because it fails to recognise the profound artistic importance of modifying, even destroying, works of art, and of freeing art from the control of the artist” (p.265). Moreover, the artistic value of art, in contradiction, may decline as a result of preservation. To exemplify this, Adler (2009) points out that Mona Lisa has now become disappointing. She believes that Mona Lisa has lost its “aura,” because the copy of the artwork can be viewed anywhere and easily reproduced, diminishing its “uniqueness.”

Adler’s (2009) objection to the “special right” of art truly redefines the objective of art destruction. Here, she emphasises that art objects should not be too limited by merely their creator’s imagination. Instead, art should be free from the control of the artist. Modifying an artwork, therefore, needs to be considered an extension of the artists’ will, rather than an insult to their names. In addition, destroying art can instead open a whole new area of creativity, something that can bring new characteristics to art objects that have become too “boring”, as highlighted by Adler (2009). The purpose of art destruction for some may not solely be to inflict damage but to shed new light and creativity on a rather “dull” piece.

I believe art is the combination of one's thoughts, emotions, intuition, and desires. Every person can, therefore, interpret art differently. Offering a conservative perspective, Bhati and Pearce (2016) claim that art may be interpreted as a legacy passed down for generations. In contrast, Adler (2009) emphasises the potential of destruction to convey creativity. She believes that arts now are too restricted by their creators' ideas that may lose their richness over time. Destruction can be seen as a way to revive such "disappointing" arts.

Ultimately, the goal of art is to offer a fresh perspective; a unique, novel revelation that may challenge or even change the norm of society. Yet, we are in a period of "art stagnation," where the art object is basically monotonous. For instance, let us try to Google "art." Most, if not all search results will only show the same, expected rectangular-shaped paintings—nothing special. To break out from this, I believe one of the ways is to regard both art preservation and destruction as equal. Only when this happens, may society finally realise the potential of destruction to serve as a new, not-so-boring art perspective. Maybe we will be the lucky ones to witness art destruction as a new movement in the future. After all, the future would eventually determine what makes art worth preserving, right?

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CC0001

The Value of Busyness

Ng Yong Jie

When I entered Anytime Fitness in Jurong West, I was first greeted by a welcoming gym staff, followed by a foul and unwelcoming smell. This place reeked of sweat. The air felt raw and musty, but strangely, no one seemed bothered by it. Albeit not the most pleasant of smells, this scent signalled work; it signalled labour. While the gym is small, the mirrors spanning across the four walls created the illusion of space. Numerous machines, racks, and weights were strategically placed to maximise the scarce floor area. The cramped space, the absence of natural light and the dim lighting made the gym feel like a dungeon.

When the clock struck six, a dozen working professionals dressed in office wear streamed in. As if they were participating in an emergency drill, the professionals scuttled to the changing room to change into fresh sets of activewear. Visibly fatigued, presumably due to a long day of work, they each began their workout, grunting as they pushed and grimacing as they pulled. Discordant sounds of metal slamming reverberated throughout the gym but there was no chatter. Every individual was plugged in and focused as they toiled away, lifting weights over and over. There was a noticeable yet inexplicable sense of urgency behind every movement in the gym. No one was there to frolic; people came here to work.

Some professionals had come directly from work, and some had made a pitstop at home en route to the gym, but one thing was universal—they all appeared haggard when they arrived. Despite having just ended their day jobs, to them, the day's worth of work was far from being concluded without coming to the gym. There was a palpable sense of urgency in the gym; perhaps the professionals had somewhere to be, or perhaps they yearned to go home for a good night's rest before the cycle repeats. Like the way the machines were densely packed into this small gym, these people seem to have tightly packed schedules. Their commitment to working out despite their fatigue is incredible. This led me to the questions: Why do these professionals pack their schedules so tightly with work and working out? How does the professional class perceive work in relation to rest and how is this transforming the way they schedule their lives?

Hsee et al. (2010) believe that humans have innate desires to be busy, claiming that "people dread idleness [and] need a reason to be busy" (p.926). Hsee et al. (2010) conducted two similar experiments to prove their points. A hundred students were isolated in a room and made to choose between delivering a form or idling, and they were promised a candy reward regardless of

choice. The candy reward offered for both choices was the same in the first experiment, but different in the second. The two experiments yielded contrasting results; while the majority of students (68%) chose to idle in the first experiment, a larger proportion (59%) chose to deliver the form in the second experiment. Hsee et al. (2010) found that while humans naturally prefer to idle, they have the desire to be busy and will do so once there is a justification, even if it is a trivial one. Hsee et al. (2010) attribute this phenomenon to evolutionary reasons. As resources are scarce in the past, our human ancestors have to conserve energy to fight for resources for survival. In modern times, humans do not have to waste energy on basic needs to survive; therefore, we have excess energy that needs to be expended and we do so by staying busy.

Hsee et al.'s (2010) conclusions help explain why the professionals at the gym preferred to keep themselves engaged after working hours rather than idle. However, the study does not explain why these individuals chose to engage specifically in a physically demanding activity among myriad choices. It seems unlikely that idleness aversion alone could push these professionals to exert themselves to this degree. This, therefore, hints at the presence of other motivations for them. In fact, in this day and age, people are busier than ever and many even seem to enjoy being busy (Schulte, 2014). This raises the question of whether the state of being busy is, in itself, seen as a desirable and valuable thing in our modern society.

Bellezza et al. (2017) claim that a busy lifestyle has become an aspirational status symbol (p. 118). Just as how people usually spend money on items that

signal status, they posit that people can signal status with the way they spend their time as well. In a study conducted on three hundred Americans, participants were made to infer the status of two hypothetical individuals through Facebook posts; one is portrayed to be busy and the other, less so (Bellezza et al. 2017). Corroborating Bellezza et al.'s (2017) hypothesis, statistical results show that the busier individual was rated higher across all the status measures than the less busy individual. Interestingly, an identical experiment conducted on Italians produced reversed results vis-à-vis the American one. Bellezza et al. (2017) attributes the conflicting experimental results to the difference in perceived social mobility between the two countries. As Americans believe they live in a more socially mobile society, they view busyness as an effective vehicle to move up the social ladder (Alesina et al. 2004). Conversely, Europeans think that they live in a less mobile society, thus associating busyness with the necessity of working to support one's family, rather than as a condition which is desirable and aspirational (Alesina et al. 2004).

Many consider Singapore to be a society where upward social mobility is attainable (e.g. Teo et al. 2018). Therefore, I believe Singaporeans would hold a perception of busyness similar to that of the Americans rather than the Italians—in other words, Singaporeans are likely to associate a busy individual with success. This perception has caused Singaporeans to place more significance on performing work. Not only does working more elevate our sense of self-worth, it also heightens the respect we gain from our peers. The benefits of being (or looking) busy motivate professionals to

work more and stay productive even after working hours.

While Hsee et al.'s (2010) study seems to think that there are no downsides to being busy, and that it is part of our natural inclination to want to avoid idleness, Alesina et al.'s (2004) research reveals that different cultures view busyness differently. In the case of Italy, busyness is seen as a negative thing due to its relation with the lower class of society. Likewise, in Singapore, despite our association of busyness with success, we are also beginning to associate busyness with negative feelings such as stress and anxiety (HR in Asia, 2019). Even if we grant that idleness aversion is part of human nature, it is undeniable that a culture that valorises busyness, like ours, has pressured people into leading busy lifestyles.

Living in a society that values hard work, Singaporeans feel forced to conform to societal ideals of efficiency and productivity. Being busy is no longer a choice; rather, it has become an expectation. These external or even self-imposed expectations induce feelings of anxiety and worry the moment we fail to maximise our time. This epidemic of "involuntary busyness" is especially prevalent among college students. As a student myself, I can confirm that the compulsion to stay busy is real and has become commonplace in our lives. We all feel this immense pressure to pack our schedules with work, so much so that we neglect rest and leisure, all for the purpose of enhancing our portfolios to secure future opportunities. This way of life reflects the reality of the rat race in Singapore, and perhaps also marks the beginning of it for us. Indeed, working hard towards our goals and

aspirations is important, but something else just as important, that we so often fail to do, is taking care of the vessel that gets us there. As a society, I hope, in time to come, that we recognise the significance of rest and the value of leisure, and that we no longer feel anxious when we pause to take a break. By endeavouring towards a balance between busyness and idleness, we can all lead healthier, more productive and fulfilling lives.

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CC0001

Envisioning and Embodying Inclusivity: How LGBTQ+ Tattoo Artists in Singapore Deal with Stigma

Elijah Tay

As she opened the parlour door, I was greeted with her welcoming smile and confident demeanor. I felt instantly at ease knowing that *she* was the one who was about to create a permanent masterpiece on my body. As the needle gently grazed my skin, she checked in on me constantly, “Are you feeling ok? Let me know if you need a break!”. Her warmth created a comfortable atmosphere; we were soon chatting and laughing like old friends.

Victoria (she/her)²¹ is an LGBTQ+ tattoo artist in Singapore. Her well-adjusted manner, sense of purpose, and self-assuredness are actually surprising, considering the challenges that come from being in a doubly stigmatised role as an LGBTQ+ person *and* a tattoo artist. Our conservative society continues to hold onto conventional expectations of cisgender normativity,²² so queer²³ people tend to be seen as sexual deviants, as “sinners” against the “natural” course of human intimacy and sexual attraction; our intolerant

society continues to perceive tattoo artists as menacing, despicable good-for-nothings. Imagine simply trying to live life as your authentic self, only for society to stigmatise you for who you are, causing you to feel rejected and unsafe even amongst friends and family. The prejudices that LGBTQ+ people and tattoo artists tend to face is a microcosm of the lived experiences of the various forms of marginalisation that prevail in our conservative, conformist society. Facing constant scrutiny and being seen as less than others imposes a mental toll on stigmatised individuals, and they are forced to work much harder than the “typical exemplary citizen” to be recognised for their legitimacy and efforts. Even then, with deep-seated prejudices against LGBTQ+ people and tattoo artists, they may still receive less recognition despite their greater amount of work and grit. More often than not, such injustices and nerve-wracking uncertainties make it difficult for them to even *hope* to thrive.

²¹ Victoria uses “she/her” pronouns.

²² Cisheteronormativity is defined as “A pervasive system of belief that centers and naturalizes heterosexuality and a binary system of assigned sex/gender where there are two rigid, distinct ways of being: assigned-male-at-birth masculine man and assigned-female-at-birth feminine woman, both of whom experience exclusively heterosexual attraction.” (“Glossary”, n.d.)

²³ “Queer” is a word that describes sexual and gender identities other than straight and cisgender. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people may all identify with the word queer. Queer is sometimes used to express that sexuality and gender can be complicated, change over time, and might not fit neatly into either/or identities, like male or female, gay or straight. (“What does queer mean?”, n.d.)

Victoria, however, deviates from such trends—it is astonishing how, wearing the hats of both an LGBTQ+ person and a tattoo artist, she has found a way to wrestle through these unfair circumstances, build her resilience, and become stronger in standing up for what she wants. But what is even more impressive is her commitment to creating a safe, queer-affirming space for her clients to feel comfortable in their own skin (literally and figuratively). As a transgender client, I am grateful to have experienced this first-hand. She also recalls a client who was initially very quiet, but gradually opened up, and spoke freely to her even about many taboo things. Such incidents are a testament to Victoria's strides in externalising her self-assurance to create a safe space for her clients, despite and amidst the hostile climate that prejudices queer people and tattoos.

Victoria's ability to handle the intersectionality of her socially vilified identities prompted me to ponder: How can other LGBTQ+ tattoo artists in Singapore deal with the layers of stigmatisation that they face, as they pursue their passions and the discovery of their self-identity?

Emma Specter (2021) writes precisely about tattoo artists like Victoria. In her article, "How a New Generation of Queer Artists and Patrons Are Redefining Tattoo Culture on Their Own Terms," Specter (2021) addresses how tattooing is a vulnerable and daunting experience for clients who surrender their skin to the artist and space. However, minorities like women and LGBTQ+ folks

face an additional layer of anxiety, as the "often white, cisgender, and heteronormative face of mainstream tattoo culture" gives rise to "many instances of casual homophobia and transphobia in tattoo shops" (Specter, 2021). In contrast, queer-friendly tattoo shops are safe spaces for LGBTQ+ folks. They provide "a haven from toxic masculinity," highlighting the importance of such safe spaces "designed specifically for women and members of the LGBTQ+ community" (Specter, 2021).

The stigmatisation that tattoo culture faces does not excuse the stigmatisation that it perpetuates against other groups. The cisheteronormative "mainstream" tattoo culture often normalises microaggressions and discrimination against LGBTQ+ clients. Such instances become easy to overlook and ignore, enabling continued homophobia and transphobia even within the tattoo industry. As an LGBTQ+ client myself, I intentionally seek out tattoo artists who are also LGBTQ+ or otherwise indicate their pronouns in their Instagram bio—a common aspect of trans allyship—to protect myself from discrimination. Even then, I have been misgendered²⁴ in some of these spaces, causing me mental distress. When even seemingly well-meaning cisheterosexual people display such deep-seated prejudices, this reflects the urgent need for such biases to be addressed and unlearned in order to start introducing inclusive practices for queer people to feel safe and comfortable in tattoo shops. Safe spaces like Victoria's tattoo shop have allowed clients to feel at ease as we are, without worrying about the violence inflicted upon us merely based

²⁴ According to Clement (2018), "Misgendering occurs when you intentionally or unintentionally refer to a person, relate to a person, or use language to describe a person that doesn't align

with their affirmed gender. For example, referring to a woman as "he" or calling her a "guy" is an act of misgendering."

on our identity. For fellow LGBTQ+ tattoo artists to deal with facing layers of stigmatisation, queer and cisheterosexual artists alike must reclaim tattoo culture in a way that shifts away from the norms of aggression and prejudices, to empower and embrace minorities within the minority community. Organisers at large need to start prioritising making their spaces all-inclusive and safe, instead of providing such accessibility as an after-thought, or even not at all.

Carson Bruns (2018) shares a similar hope for destigmatisation. In his TED Talk, "Could a tattoo help you stay healthy?", he presents how in the future, tattoos will not only be beautiful but will also be functional as we explore the possibilities of what we can do with high-tech tattoos. Bruns (2018) highlights how "in over five thousand years, we've done very little to update tattoo technology"—modern-day tattoos, like those from thousands of years ago, continue to be made using "tiny pigment particles." He contrasts this vision against how tattoos today often serve the purpose of self-expression and then prompts the audience to reimagine the possible additional uses of tattoos if the aforementioned particles could be replaced with other particles (Bruns, 2018). In particular, he relates such possible advancements in tattoo technology to empower those tattooed to take better care of their health. Bruns (2018) "envision[s] a future where tattoos enable us," marrying these technological functions with our physical selves.

Brun's (2018) vision could be critical in reframing mainstream society's disapproval of tattoos. If tattoos can serve a need as fundamental as healthcare, the general public may come to

experience the pivotal benefits of tattoos first-hand. Tattoos could then become normalised as a part of societal conventions, rather than a judgement of deviance. A similar approach, however, cannot be adopted for the destigmatisation of LGBTQ+ identities. Queer people are *people*—they are not tools, not objects that need to serve a certain function for their existence to be palatable to the general public. Whilst Bruns' (2018) recognition of the power that comes from changing society's perspective is useful, the specifics of his solution are not applicable in reducing the hostility that the LGBTQ+ tattoo community faces. To deal with such layers of stigma, LGBTQ+ tattoo artists have to continue pushing against the current narrative of tattoo culture by other means to promote one of greater inclusivity—by creating their own safe spaces and encouraging others to do the same.

In dealing with the layers of stigmatisation, queer artists can continue to shift the narrative towards LGBTQ+ inclusivity through their art, tattoos, and the safe spaces they create in their shops. Their resolution to keep representing themselves can change society's perspectives, uprooting deep-seated prejudices, and normalising LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Their resolution to keep representing themselves can also inspire others to engage in better and more informed allyship. After all, stigma does not emerge out of nowhere: various social structures socialise people to reproduce such prejudices. So, with LGBTQ+ tattoo artists going against the tides of such stigma, others begin to unlearn their prejudices and become allies that support and uplift those who have been let down by fellow members of society, empowering them to live unapologetically without the fear of facing

persecution for simply being who they are and doing what they love. The shifting narrative championed by LGBTQ+ tattoo artists themselves hence ripples through society to deconstruct the discrimination they face, and to uplift them from marginalisation, so as to create safe spaces where people can simply *be*.

It was heartwarming to hear how Victoria's performance of her unapologetic self has also served as a source of enlightenment for the people around her. When she first shared about her tattoos with her father, he was a bit hesitant. However, after seeing some of her work, he was impressed and started seeing tattoos in a different light. Watching Victoria grow into the self-assured woman she is today possibly inspired her father to unlearn his prejudices and grow a deeper appreciation for her tattoo artistry. Perhaps embracing their own identities, and living unapologetically as themselves (if they have the capacity) allows LGBTQ+ tattoo artists to deal with the stigma they face by inspiring others to unlearn their prejudices and work towards greater acceptance.

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CC0001

Traditional Masculine Stereotypes and Male Victims of Intimate Partner Violence

Jordan Wong Howe Ren

When it comes to abusive heterosexual relationships, men are often viewed as perpetrators and women as victims. Although the statistics support this view, society seems to forget that males can be victims too. A 2020 report produced by ManKind, a domestic violence charity in the United Kingdom that supports over 100,000 male victims yearly, found that 25% of men worldwide have experienced some form of violence from a partner. However, these men are 2.6 times less likely than female victims to speak about it (ManKind, 2020). Having seen the effects of intimate partner violence (IPV) first-hand, these statistics hit close to home, and drove me to look into the community of male victims of IPV. Fortunately, John*, a lieutenant colonel in the army and a treasured friend to my family, had agreed to speak to me about his experience with IPV. As I waited for him in the outdoor seating area of a secluded café, I recalled the countless nights he appeared unannounced at my home hoping for some solace and advice from my parents. He would show up crying, with a new injury every time.

I asked John about his wife Kim. John fidgeted in his embellished army uniform and hesitated for a while before he replied. He elaborated on how she would alternate between bites, kicks, and punches. In

addition, Kim would threaten him with suicide when he didn't listen to her. He was not allowed to eat at times either. "The list goes on. But honestly, it's nothing I can't handle." I began to wonder if John was trivialising his suffering. Clearly, no person deserved to be treated like this.

I asked why he had not made the simple decision to leave. John let out an extended sigh, which seemed reflective of his familiarity to the question. "It took me five years to recognise that I was being abused. Even now, I don't think it warrants a divorce." John replied. "I was taught to be tougher than that." John continued. This seemed consistent with the toxic yet familiar notions of "boys don't cry" and "act like a man."

Men who are tough, tactical, and stoic tend to be valued in society, and even more so in a military context. As a lieutenant colonel with countless soldiers under his authority, it is reasonable to believe that John experiences a stronger pressure to be perceived as the archetypal masculine authority. These masculine stereotypes may be the reason why John would trivialise and stay quiet about his marital suffering and refuse to seek therapy. Consequently, I am compelled to question how traditional masculine stereotypes influence

male victims to endure intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships.

In a journal article, Hine et al. (2020) explore the help-seeking experiences of male victims of IPV and discuss how societal definitions of masculinity hinder the recognition of male victims' abuse. It argues at length society's reluctance to recognise male victims due to gender stereotypes, and details how men have reported being mocked and accused of the abuse instead. These men are pitted against a "tide of recognition," where the article believes that the shortage of societal recognition stops these victims from even acknowledging their own abuse (Hine et al., 2020). Simultaneously, men already struggle with acknowledging their victimisation due to a concern of jeopardising their perceived masculinity. Hence, the authors argue that society's recognition of their victimisation is fundamentally crucial for these men to receive necessary help. The stereotype surrounding IPV sets men as culprits of abuse, which precludes the notion of men being victims—presenting men a "double jeopardy" (Hine et al., 2020), where they face discrimination as men *and* victims. Along with the stigma surrounding male victimisation and the societal perception of victimisation as a "female domain," men also face extra gender-specific barriers to the support and services they desperately require.

This article widens my understanding of the help-seeking journey of male victims and points out the uphill battle they face—where men struggle with acknowledging their victimisation and are simultaneously perceived by society as incapable of being victims. The "double jeopardy" and "tide of

recognition" mentioned in the article make it clear to male victims that they will not be supported or believed and may even face public ridicule and accusation. Masculine stereotypes, both societal and internalised, play a central role in influencing how society expects victims to act, and how the victims expect themselves to act. Resultingly, these stereotypes create an environment where men are strongly discouraged from seeking help—since it would likely reap nothing and do more harm than good for them. The help-seeking journey of male victims is thus turned against them, and these men are left to somehow defend themselves alone.

In a journal article, Brooks et al. (2017) discuss a study involving male victims of IPV, and similarly mentions a "forbidden narrative" surrounding men's victimisation, which refers to societal prejudice and feelings of emasculation when they seek help. It also discusses hegemonic masculinity in the context of sexual assault perpetrated by female partners and found that the male victims tended to avoid labelling the coercive acts as such because of stereotypes that deem "masculine sexuality as being initiative and dominant" (Brooks et al., 2017). In cases of IPV, the men seemed to subconsciously shape their narratives in a way that underplayed their suffering and maintained their masculinity—suggesting a "denial of fear and their own status as victim" (Brooks et al., 2017). The article proceeds to discuss contradictions in masculine stereotypes that encourage gentlemanly behaviour yet encourage aggressiveness—describing how it has resulted in the victims believing that they were "truly courageous" by tolerating their partners' abuse (Brooks et al., 2017). It finally describes how the

men never acknowledged their victimisation and instead fell behind the flawed logic of enduring as an act of chivalry.

It is clear through this article that masculine stereotypes play an influential role when male victims narrativise their IPV experiences. Even in cases of sexual assault, it seems that masculine ideas of sexuality still hold sway in the male victim's narrative. The contradiction and ambiguity in masculine stereotypes between chivalry and aggressiveness promote a tendency of victims to downplay and even fail to recognise the severity of their IPV, which is likely to influence the victim to endure it and even attribute courage to their sufferance. In the face of IPV, male victims still seek to maintain a semblance of power and control in their narrative, which only serves to prolong their suffering and obscure their victimisation from both themselves and society at large—creating a vicious circle. This desire to maintain power and control seems to be rooted in masculine ideas of how a male should be in a relationship.

Both articles are aligned in their respective concepts of a “double jeopardy” and “forbidden narrative,” with masculine stereotypes as a common denominator. Hine et al. (2020) focus on how these stereotypes negatively impact the help-seeking journey of victims, while Brooks et al. (2017) primarily explain the stereotypes’ influence on how victims narrativise their own IPV experiences. I had initially thought that the silence of male victims was largely due to a fear of being seen as weak, but it has become clear that the impact from masculine stereotypes on male victims is much more

extensive and holistic. Masculine stereotypes, as one can reasonably infer, discourage male victims not only from acknowledging their abuse but also from ever escaping their abusive situations. Distressingly, these stereotypes may even lead victims to believe that enduring is both the right and masculine thing to do. As masculine stereotypes dictate that men hold positions of control, it becomes almost inconceivable in the minds of victims that they in fact have lost control. Their only logical course of action would thus be to cling on to the narratives which they fully control. With both their help-seeking journeys and narratives turned against them, the vicious circle repeats itself.

As ideas of what a man is evolve over time, it seems only logical that the treatment of male victims evolves too. However, these traditional masculine stereotypes still carry a stronghold over the approach for male victims. One can only hope that these societal perceptions evolve quickly to ensure that male victims are recognised and no longer discouraged from speaking about their abuse.

* indicates that the name has been changed

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CC0001

Offenders and the Public: Unearthing the Root Cause of Stigmatisation

Anand Chaanan Singh

Speaking to volunteer counsellors at the Changi Prison Complex gave me much insight into the lives and troubles faced by inmates and volunteers alike in Singapore.

"My father was the abusive one. I only took drugs. I never harmed anyone, so why am I here but not him?" "He was the one who kept saying things about me!" One volunteer explains the sense of injustice some inmates feel about their circumstances. The barrage of difficult questions inmates pose to volunteers does not simply end there. Questions by inmates often get personal, especially when the volunteers are new. "Ma'am, what do you know? You live my life, then you know!" And volunteers who cannot manage these situations effectively are often met with rolling eyes and, at times, with flying chairs. This discord between inmates and the public is evident even after inmates leave prison. In an interview, Benny Se Teo, founder of Eighteen Chefs, reveals that some of his chefs only listen to and respect other ex-offenders (MothershipSG, 2022).

On the other hand, many volunteers talk about the prevalence of a latent stigma against inmates. "When inmates are released, people who should be friendly towards them are not," including family or potential employers. These people often label

inmates as "untrustworthy offenders." On the contrary, "those who shouldn't be friendly towards them [inmates] are," including other offenders such as drug dealers. As a result, inmates who leave prison are often hurled back into it as they cannot navigate the world outside.

Seeing the perspectives of both inmates and non-inmates made me mindful of the tension between these groups. In this conflict, however, inmates appear to get the shorter end of the stick. Despite Singapore's low recidivism rate internationally, more than 1 in 5 (Shanmugam, 2021) of our fellow Singaporeans return to prison within just two years of leaving. This fact made me wonder why some inmates struggled to re-integrate into society, and the stigmatisation I had observed struck me as one possibility. I, therefore, questioned: why do Singaporeans continue to stigmatise offenders?

My belief that most Singaporeans are reasonable and kind led me to investigate whether we might be susceptible to hidden biases. In the backdrop of many years of scientific study, Yudkin and Bavel (2016) explain that implicit biases link to multiple types of discrimination, such as in organisations and that everyone has these biases. Beyond overt prejudices, these biases stem from fundamental

human nature that causes us to divide the world into social groups. Originating from our evolutionary history, we divide people into groups we belong to and those we don't by practising "us vs them" thinking. We tend to treat "in-group" members favourably by viewing them as allies and sources of aid. On the other hand, we consider "out-group" members as threats. Correspondingly, when making decisions involving members from each group, we are more likely to harshly punish a wrong-doer from an out-group and be lenient with one from an in-group. The authors also reveal that as humans tend to group themselves by race, biases that emerge from group divides are likely the root of racial discrimination. However, as shown from multiple experiments, this inherent bias mostly appears "reflexively," for example, when people make quick decisions while being distracted in an experimental setting. With careful thought and reflection, humans can overcome wrong instincts.

The proposition that "group affiliations" cause implicit biases, as discussed by Yudkin and Bavel (2016), seems cardinal to understanding social discrimination, including social stigmas against ex-offenders. From the actions of family members and employers, it is clear that the public often outcasts inmates, viewing them as incapable or unworthy but, more strikingly, as an out-group that does not deserve the same treatment as people who have never offended. On the other hand, the actions of inmates treating volunteers or colleagues, upon release, with contempt indicate the very same divide. Inmates often do not present themselves or speak to non-inmates with the same respect they would show to other inmates. While I agree that

forming such divides might be an instinct on both sides, thought and reflection may not always be sufficient to overcome them. The use of thought and reflection to overcome biases implies that people will always be able to come to conclusions that diminish biases by employing a sound line of reasoning. However, as I observed, many inmates brought up seemingly logical arguments for why their treatment was unjust. And by antagonising non-inmates, these arguments in no way lead to a diminishing of biases. Therefore, social divides and stigmatisation might persist not because of the lack of conscious reflection but perhaps due to systemic factors, such as social conditioning.

In the context of the United States, Hoskins and Towns (2021) explore how the choice of words of journalists and the general public influences our perception of offenders. Social media and news outlets often use dehumanising jargon such as "offender," "criminal," or "convict." The effect is to reduce "people to their worst moments, codifying stigma and haunting people for years after sentences are served." (Hoskins and Towns, 2021) Beyond causing harm to offenders, people are more likely to view offenders negatively and dehumanise them due to such labels. This includes lower empathy and lower willingness to assist in reforming these individuals. However, "people first" words such as "person with prior convictions" are more likely to cause people to associate with offenders positively. The authors admit that changing words alone would not undo high incarceration rates, but they still "make a difference." And for us to reenvision our approach to justice, we must recognise that we are dealing with

people and thus change our language to be more people-centric.

Hoskins and Towns (2021) shed light on the impact of language on shaping people's perception of offenders. It is clear how the usage of dehumanising language could result in increased negative perceptions and hence social stigma. Although the article focuses on the circumstances in the United States, Singaporeans too suffer from the same effects of language. As I had observed from my interviews, the language used to describe inmates in Singapore does not seem to be significantly better than that presented in the article. This language, therefore, exacerbates our stigmatisation of offenders by the exact mechanism described by Hoskins and Towns (2021).

However, this view on the effect of language fails to consider the flip side of the coin. As shown by our analysis of group divides, responsibility for the divide lies on both sides. Inmates as a community may not be as free from responsibility as this view may suggest. Language, or at the least the culture of only trusting other ex-offenders and not non-offenders, could affect inmates' perception of the public, similar to how it does the other way around. This view also fails to consider how this use of language comes about and why it perpetuates. Regardless, the view on the effect of language and the view of implicit biases, both in some ways, fall short in explaining the fundamental reasons for stigmatisation. We can agree that group divides exist but cannot explain why they persist. We also understand that language contributes to negative perceptions and hence stigmatisation. However, we

also do not understand how such language comes about or why it persists.

What could be a more fundamental reason underpinning both these views is our societies' inability to change and leave old ideas behind. On the one hand, inmates may emulate the behaviour of senior inmates by adopting their beliefs and attitudes, which causes them to view the public with contempt and generalise people as being unsympathetic. On the other hand, the public may adopt traditional thinking such as "criminals are bad," causing them to generalise and view inmates as untrustworthy. The distinction between these two groups would explain persistent group divides, and the hostility inherent in their thoughts could explain the consistent use of negative language. The negative stereotypes present within public and inmate communities may reinforce one another. Without a significant catalyst of change, these mutually-reinforcing stereotypes would cause stigmatisation to perpetuate from generation to generation. We may not know what exactly set the avalanche of stigmatisation off, but what we do know is what keeps it growing.

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CC0001

John Uncle's: More Than Just a Meal

Anushree Arora

It is just a regular night at John Uncle's, an Indian stall tucked away at the end of Tamarind Hall canteen at Nanyang Technological University. There is something that makes it so distinct from the others in the canteen. It is more than the huddles of hungry students waiting eagerly for that one Indian meal they have been craving all day, or the smell of Indian flavours coming from freshly cooked food. Unlike the merely professional, shopkeeper-customer relationship that characterises the exchanges at the other stalls, John Uncle's stall seems to come alive every night. I notice how students talk freely about their exhausting days, giving each other random life updates, making new friends as they wait for their food. John Uncle himself joins in, engaging in friendly banter with us, even as he works tirelessly behind the counter to serve us. At times, he even has a heartfelt conversation about life with his customers.

He knows us beyond our "One Paneer and Rice" order and calls out to us as "brother" and "sister." When the occasional non-Indian customer walks up to him, looking to try something new, he greets them with a "What's up bro?" It is his superhuman service at peak hours, his two hands stretching from one end of the counter to the other while he

takes order after order, and his smile expressing the love with which he feeds us that transforms the stall into a small community of its own.

The beauty of this stall and the food served here is the establishment of this unique human connection between John Uncle and each of us. As I soak in the experience of finding a home away from home, I wonder, what is it about John Uncle's approach that transforms the mundane process of waiting for a meal into a memorable experience of community?

In a reflective essay on Indian food stores in the United States, Nitish Pahwa, an Indian-American, explains how these stores provide a gateway to Indian culture and are "mini-worlds that carry a strong sense of home." He explains that being an "Indian at Indian-owned store" in a foreign country creates a unique and "intimate" experience because of the way you are treated, almost as if you are being "welcomed into someone else's house" (Pahwa, 2018). The interactions between the customer and the storekeeper, especially "origin explanations" create the foundations of a long-term relationship—one that is of comfort and homeliness—at a time when one is navigating a new culture and country on their own. In places so far from home, "having people like you and a source

of recognisable food" provides one the strength to "brave a new home" (Pahwa, 2018).

Pahwa's (2018) perspective on how walking into Indian food stores is like entering portals that take you as close to home as possible is strongly backed by his personal experiences. He highlights a distinct characteristic of these stores: the treatment of the customer as if they are being welcomed into someone's house. This stems from the traditional Indian philosophy of Atithi Devo Bhava, which literally translates to "You become the one who considers that Guests are equivalent to God." Considering one's customers as the equivalent of God instantly establishes a certain level of mutual respect and recognition. This effect may not be created if the same customer were treated as one more ordinary person to be served. For a foreign student who feels out of place and rather insignificant, being made to feel special and recognised is exactly the comfort they are looking for.

Pahwa (2018) further accurately reasons that engaging in conversations about origin stories builds a long-term relationship. This is because stories about which part of India one comes from is like the thread that ties every Indian immigrant together. Moreover, they try to cling on to their cultural identity they fear they might lose. Being able to talk about it with someone who can relate to them provides a sense of validation, that they too, belong. In these ways, stores like John Uncle's serve a purpose far beyond providing sustenance: they are safe havens.

Pahwa (2018) describes precisely why John Uncle's is able to make me feel this sense of belongingness

at his stall, but there is something more to John Uncle's approach. Extending Pahwa's (2018) argument, another key factor that can help create such a safe and intimate experience is the personality of the store owner. Part of the reason that we can be ourselves in these spaces is because John Uncle chooses to let his guard down first. His extroverted and outgoing personality goes a long way in making us feel like his cherished guests.

Besides the role of these stalls in providing a homely atmosphere, they also create a wider social impact within immigrant communities. Janika Oza (2015) discusses the social functions of immigrant-owned restaurants in her paper, "A Literature Review on the Social Role of Immigrant-owned Food Businesses in Diasporic Communities." She goes beyond understanding the role of these stalls to create a sense of home and examines them as "cultural and social hubs [that] alleviate social isolation and connect migrants to certain resources" (Oza, 2015, p.1). One of her key arguments is that they function as points of "informational exchange" (Oza, 2015). Based on her studies, she concludes that "owners and servers at the restaurants act as agents" who gather and share information that immigrants, especially international students, come to seek out (Oza, 2015). This is because of the sense of familiarity created in these informal settings. Moreover, she highlights how the owner is generally looked up to as "aunt" or "uncle" which elevates the trust that migrants place on them as a source of information (Oza, 2015).

Oza's (2015) research extends Pahwa's (2018) perspective to how this informal feeling of community allows these places to become credible spaces of informational exchange. When students

view the store owner as an elderly figure, someone whom they almost consider to be like family, the information they gather is assumed to be much more reliable and in their best interests. John Uncle's stall does act as a vehicle of information and cultural exchange. I remember a brief interaction between him and me when he asked me what my plans were after completing my studies here. I shared some ideas I had in mind, and he proceeded to advise me about certain things I should remember. Such conversations serve as a reminder that there is still someone looking out for me even though I am so far from home.

Oza's (2015) argument about informational exchange can further be applied to interactions between fellow customers. Since customers from all walks of life come to these places for the common purpose of food, a huge melting pot of ideas and information is created, thus elevating the sense of comfort and community. I have seen countless instances of these at John Uncle's stall. Since this is the only Indian stall on the NTU campus, students across years and programmes come here to eat. What is important to note is that John Uncle plays a significant role in starting and facilitating these informal conversations. His approach of involving everyone around him in his conversations encourages taking ownership to carry these discussions forward. This "spill over" effect in turn creates a richer experience of community.

Pahwa (2018) and Oza (2015) both provide distinct yet complementary perspectives on the role of immigrant-owned food businesses in foreign communities. They explore how the owners of these stores create an environment that is

perceived as a shelter for immigrants and as a trustworthy source of information. Most importantly, they highlight how these places act like a single thread that many immigrants, like us students, hold onto to recreate and relive our memories of home.

So, what exactly is it about John Uncle's approach that transforms the mundane exercise of buying a meal into an experience of community? I believe that his approach is a combination of multiple processes that work together to create the entire community experience. His personality that is strongly backed by the Indian philosophy of treating his customers like God makes him approach us with a keen interest to engage in meaningful conversations. Here, discussions like those about origin explanations act as an icebreaker to establish a warm rapport and also as a quick trip down memory lane. Such repeated interactions over time provide us with a strong and reliable support system, one where there is a continuous exchange of information and ideas amongst everyone. He actively puts effort to build lasting relationships and most importantly fosters the need for a collective effort in creating and upholding this sense of community.

Moving to a foreign country and navigating the ocean of changes happening is no easy task. With the constant craving to be back home, having someone like John Uncle and his stall quite drastically alleviates the difficulties of being a foreign student. Most importantly, realising that a person is putting his heart into making his humble food stall serve a greater purpose makes me appreciate my visits here more.

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CC0001

Work Hard, Play Harder

Advait Bharat Deshpande

"Nil Sine Labore. (Nothing without Labour)." I read off the bright red and yellow stripes on the walkway as I stepped into my alma mater, Victoria Junior College. I climbed into my vantage point, the famed Treehouse, and relived my memories as I watched the Victorians go about their lives. In stark contrast to my care-free stroll into campus, there were hordes of students, strutting around hurriedly with places to be. Piles of books clutched in their arms, the students rushed to their next class. I remembered what it was like, to have assignment after assignment, and classes without breaks, with no respite for the mind. "Victorians like to work hard, and play harder," it was said, and oh how true that statement was.



Figure 1. The Treehouse, Victoria Junior College

The bell rang, and the scenes shifted. Waves of students changed into the iconic, bright yellow "Fi (Red)-Up" T-shirts, with no more books to be seen. Groups ran up to the Treehouse, others ran to the field with a football or frisbee, while some got their hands on arcade games in the lounge (Figure 1). As if possessed by the Victorian Spirit, student after student, who just an hour ago walked around with the weight of the world on their shoulders, suddenly had a spring in their step. The work was over, and it was time to "play." Like flipping a switch, these Victorians seemingly lived double lives in and out of the classroom. Yet, as seamlessly as they managed their commitments, there were others hidden in the corners, unable to keep up with the same vigour and intensity. They just needed to catch a break, unlike their peers who almost seemed like they wanted to be seen "playing," as if it was a part of the work too. Seeing this made me wonder, were all those students really on top of their work? Or was it just a façade, to live up to the school culture?

While it has always been said that Victorians like to "work hard and play harder," it appears that this behaviour can be observed even outside the school. These days it is not uncommon to find working adults sharing online about how tough their lives are, as they glamourise their hard work and suffering with hashtags. Moreover, this type of

behaviour is so prevalent that it even has a name—“Performative Workaholism,” to describe the “Hustle Culture” that glorifies relentless hard work (Griffith, 2019). Similarly, this “Toil Glamour” has infiltrated many students’ lives, where many see the suffering as a rite of passage, and work even harder to be “seen.”

Yet, I remember my pre-university days as anything but dominated by this compulsion for hard work, which is why I must ask—Why is this “Hustle Culture” prevalent among our youth? What kind of influence does it have on their growth, and at what cost?

To answer this, we can learn from Yeo Eun Shin, a South Korean student, who shows us through her 2019 Ted Talk, how many Korean youth are blindly following a culture of hard work that has been drilled into them. She shared that many of them felt that leading a stressful life was okay, because everyone else was too. To make things worse, their coping mechanism was to just feign positivity, often looking like “dolls with smiles stitched to their faces” (Yeo, 2019). She also asserts that because they were so focused on conquering their mountains of assignments, many struggled with finding a purpose in life. Which is why she calls on us to “be human” and take a step back, as processing our feelings will help us find the end of the tunnel, and not just the next assignment to complete.

Yeo (2019) also states that the students engage in this self-sabotaging behaviour, not because they want to, but because they might just not know better. How could they, when all they see is that it is

part of their life, where everyone around them is doing fine and appear to be enjoying the process. The way they shrug off their workload by forcing smiles is reminiscent of how the Victorians love to “play harder,” which may be a similar coping mechanism to tide them through as they “work hard” in the day. But it can’t be so simple, can it? If this culture were merely a coping mechanism, schools could just adjust their curriculum to ease students’ workload, right?

However, the answer to this is not so clear cut. Because Zach Conway (2018), a writer for the Forbes Magazine, would tell us how inescapable this culture really is. The “hustle craze” that finds its roots in the exploitative culture at Silicon Valley is now everywhere thanks to the internet, and is glamourised by influential figures like Gary Vaynerchuk, who preaches the mindset: “Stop complaining, and go to work.” Conway (2018) also states that millennials are leaving jobs at a “record pace,” because contrary to what they have been made to expect by all these influencers, they do not receive any instant gratification from hard work. However, he raises the point that there is still an empowering effect to this culture. That seeing others enjoy working and putting in the hours may inspire us to “look beyond the traditional path” (Conway, 2018, p.8) and find our way in life. He preaches that ultimately, whether this is good or bad depends on our ability to “harness the motivation of hustle culture, without forsaking what’s really important” (Conway, 2018, p.13), which is our health and relationships.

It is definitely tempting to want to emulate the fast-

paced, high-energy, cut-throat lives that these productivity influencers portray online, because they certainly look “successful.” But with more people celebrating this lifestyle on social media, it can be easy to confuse online validation with real success, leading many into a “hustle” frenzy that only ever leads to burnout as we chase after recognition, instead of trying to find meaning in what we do. However, through Conway’s (2018) eyes we learn that if we were to “avoid these side effects,” perhaps “Hustle Culture” is not all that bad. Despite contributing heavily to mass burnout among millennials, there is value in the lifestyle it promotes. That if one were to invest more time into working towards their own goals, instead of trying to just look busy, they would start to see the merit in what influencers like Vaynerchuk promote. Which essentially is a call to action for people to wrestle back some control and take ownership over where their lives are headed. Instead of letting yourself settle into a comfortable routine, hustle culture is about driving your dreams forward by charting your own path, and not so much about blindly working hard.

While I would still like to believe that just putting my head down and working hard would set me free after I graduate, what Conway (2018) reveals makes a great deal of sense. In contrast to what Yeo (2019) shared, about how this culture is locking students into a beaten path, Conway (2018) shows that it doesn’t have to be that way. The “hustle” was never meant to become a performance, and by cutting through the noise online, one can find the true message: That “Hustle Culture” is an enabler, to help us achieve what we want. to help us achieve

what we want.

Unfortunately, most of us have got it wrong, and both Yeo (2019) and Conway (2018) are in agreement as they point out the negative impact of this culture. Yeo’s (2019) claims of how it starves students of the chance to find their purpose in life are supported by Conway’s (2018) observations of how millennials are leaving their jobs due to a lack of passion. Furthermore, in looking for reasons for why “Hustle Culture” remains prevalent, both authors offer similar ideas. What Yeo (2019) describes as peer-pressure is seen on a wider scale through Conway’s (2018) observations of the trend growing wildly through the internet and social media.

It seems easy to think that we could mitigate the negative impact of this culture by actively campaigning against it. But it must be deeper than that. I remember a time when working hard was desirable but was still acknowledged as a process that was not so pretty or glamorous. Back when it was about “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” and not “pulling a perfect shot of espresso” to post on your Instagram to let everyone know how hard you work. Witnessing the growth of “Performative Workaholism” among my peers has shown me how most of us have lost the plot. But I believe the real enemy here is not the prevailing culture or any school motto, not even social media. It’s us. Like Conway (2018) said, hustling could enable us, but we turn it into a comparison game, as we try to one-up each other—thanks to our desire to be seen. And even if it is on things we don’t find meaningful. So, let’s stop trying to “optimise” ourselves like

machines and, as Yeo (2019) put it, be human again, by choosing to follow our hearts over the endless “hustle” that has taken over our lives.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to work hard, and play harder—but let's also do it for ourselves, and for our dreams, because at the end of the day there really is “Nothing without Labour.”

[tube.com/watch?v=GceApIY4WsY&ab_channel=TEDxTalks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GceApIY4WsY&ab_channel=TEDxTalks)

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CC0001

Art or Vandalism: How Consent Has Changed the Medium of Graffiti

Nabilah Ulfah Binte Mohamed Affandi

Walking into Haji Lane was like stepping into a different side of Singapore, different from the air-conditioned shopping centres scattered around the island. The area was bustling with people on a breezy Friday evening, as the sun began to set, painting the sky a beautiful bluish-pink gradient. Laughter and conversation drifted through the air, creating a light and cheerful mood. In a place surrounded by countless food establishments and cafés, the aroma of food permeated the air, making it a futile trip if one did not come with an empty stomach. It is not a place to go if you are on a diet as you would certainly miss the whole experience of going to Haji Lane!

Even with a dimmer view at night, one would certainly not miss the vibrant murals decorating the walls of Aliwal Street. The colours were popping, as if glowing in the dark, catching the eye of anyone walking past. The murals were painted on already brightly coloured walls, further causing the stretch of wall to be distinctive even from a distance away. Some designs on the wall were similar to colourful waves, and others were abstract patterns, as irregular yet dynamic as paint splotches. The bold colours of red, blue and yellow contrasted well with one another. Each “wave” was outlined in white,

adding order and form to the colours. The murals along the streets of Haji Lane are so iconic that they would be instantly recognised if you show any Singaporean a picture of it.

Since murals, or even graffiti, are barely seen on this island where most buildings are painted in uniformed colours, Haji Lane seemed to me an outdoor gallery. Yet, knowing Singapore’s strict laws on graffiti, I wondered why these murals, boldly painted over the walls of old shophouses and alleyways, are celebrated as art, while other drawings or paintings over public features would be considered vandalism. There is a fine line between art and vandalism. Perhaps vandalism is often seen as destroying the beauty of a place, while art is often seen as a way to beautify a place. If these murals at Haji Lane were to be replicated, to even the finest detail, on another building, would it be seen as vandalism? Why are some outdoor paintings labelled as murals and why others are labelled as graffiti?

American sociologist Ronald Kramer (2010) states that graffiti is seen as a violation of law and is linked to the breaking of other laws such as theft of spray paint and trespassing into train yards in New York.

Kramer (2010) provides an intriguing perspective by quoting Nancy Macdonald, the author of "The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York", who claims that the illegality of graffiti is the "subculture's backbone," making theft a "tradition" (p.237). As graffiti became popular and prevalent in New York in the late 1970s, the illegality of graffiti was constantly being reinforced. However, as time progressed, many graffiti artists began to seek written permission from property owners to paint their walls. Since graffiti has its origins in counter-culture, which opposes the values and viewpoints of mainstream society, seeking permission is washing away the culture of illegality that graffiti once prided itself upon. Instead of doing more harm to society, graffiti is instead benefiting cities: these artists pay for their supplies, contributing to taxes while maintaining the city. Furthermore, graffiti art is becoming much more common and legalised and is even used in advertising these days, allowing artists to earn revenue from this. For instance, luxury brands like Gucci and Christian Louboutin have made use of graffiti projects as part of their advertising campaigns in Mexico City and London respectively (Ong, 2021).

Kramer (2010) shows how graffiti has become progressively accepted as mainstream art. The criminal culture of graffiti from the 1970s stigmatised this form of art, causing it to be frowned upon only up till recent decades due to the increasing popularity of graffiti artists such as Keith Haring where his depictions of figures are easily recognisable. Haring also founded his own foundation to raise awareness about AIDS through community outreach, which boosted graffiti's

reputation and the public's perception towards it (Artnet, n.d.). According to Kramer (2010), consent changes graffiti to murals and vandalism to art. However, would the act of permission-seeking dilute graffiti's culture of resistance? Although this progression may be for the greater good, seeking consent could cause artists to censor their art and the opinions they have about important issues, restraining their creativity and making it contradictory to the original purpose of graffiti. For instance, in Uzbekistan, Nadezhda Riksieva, a local graffiti artist would need to obtain a permit, by preparing a sketch while waiting for an inspector to arrive at the site where the mural is to be painted, which takes a long time before these graffiti artists can begin their work. Riksieva ultimately got permission after the idea was personally supported by the mayor (Makarenko, 2020). Even though graffiti artists ultimately have the power to design the public space and make certain decisions, they are now often strictly limited to the guidelines of the authorities. Are graffiti artists like Riksieva seeking a free space for their art and messages, or are they seeking for their art to be destigmatised by the public?

In a TED Talk, Diego Gonzalez (2015) argues that there is a stigma attached to anything that is spray painted or airbrushed, and thus, such works are seen as vandalism. Gonzalez (2015) argues against this and claims that in places with high traffic, art can share the artist's ideas and views of the world, as seen by Banksy's works. Public art can also raise the energy of the community and is a tool for mass communication, inspiration and change. West German artists during the 1960s up to 1989 expressed their feelings about the Berlin Wall

through graffiti as well as their aspirations for their future (Schapova, 2018). Gonzalez (2015) then brought up a thought-provoking perspective that slogans and advertisements around the city are defacing and vandalising our cities, instead of graffiti.

Unlike Kramer (2010), who observes how graffiti has become widely accepted today, Gonzalez (2015) insists that graffiti still wrongfully holds a “bad rep.” Yet, he also highlights that the purpose of art is a form of propagation of ideas and views, reinforcing Kramer’s (2010) points. Gonzalez (2015) offers a fresh perspective by arguing that the true culprits destroying the beauty of our city are businesses and their advertisements. However, advertisements are normalised such that no one questions them, unlike graffiti. Big brands make use of public spaces to sell aspirations, lifestyles and products, and graffiti too has the ability to express and propagate the artists’ ideas when they are given the opportunity to do so. Amidst the protests that arose after George Floyd’s death, many graffiti artists spread the message about the “Black Lives Matter” movement all around the world, even at bombed-out ruins in Syria, with prominent slogans such as “I can’t breathe” and “Say the names” to honour victims of racism (Hincks, 2020). The same message is spread by many graffiti artists in many unique ways, prompting people to ponder about the issue from various perspectives. On the contrary, advertisements that are also full of slogans and images, do not make us think, but *tell* us what to think.

While street art is much more established in America and Europe with artists such as Keith

Haring and Banksy, graffiti artists in Singapore have a harder time in allowing their work to be recognised as art instead of vandalism. With strict enforcement and rules in Singapore, there have been many instances where artists’ works have been clamped down, as seen in the Golden Staircase incident. A student who laid out gold foil all over the staircase of her HDB block to express honour towards her ancestors who were goldsmiths was ordered to take down her project. In another incident, Singaporean street artist Sam Lo, also known as Sticker Lady, pasted humorous stickers onto traffic lights and spray-painted witty messages on roads across the country. In the eyes of the authorities, they (Lo’s preferred pronoun) were seen as a vandal and arrested. Yet, it is interesting to note that Lo’s “credibility” as a street artist seemed to increase because of the illegal nature of their project (Chen, 2021). Lo’s work demonstrates graffiti’s culture of resistance as highlighted by Kramer (2010), even though their work was not overtly political. Was Lo a hero or a vandal? Is graffiti *truly* graffiti if it does not provoke or make a comment on social issues?

Kramer (2010) observes how big brands are increasingly working with graffiti artists on advertising campaigns, and though he wrote this with a positive or neutral stance, this phenomenon exemplifies Gonzalez’s (2015) criticism of advertising. Not only is advertising ruining our public spaces through billboards and posters as Gonzalez (2015) argues, but it is also encroaching the medium of graffiti. Big brands make use of graffiti’s idea of rebellion. For instance, Gucci “vandalised” Balenciaga’s storefront at Paragon by spray painting “Gucci,” but it turned out to be a

collaboration between both companies (Ong, 2021). These brands are aware of how eye-catching graffiti art can be as a form of advertising in comparison to boring, conventional billboards in public spaces. Graffiti advertisements gain even more traction when the public snaps photos of them and posts them online. By merely borrowing and mimicking the counter-culture aesthetic of graffiti, brands are far from challenging norms, yet reap profits from a culture that has been stigmatised over the years. Are graffiti artists who collaborate with big brands not worth their salt? Should these artists allow big brands to wash away the culture of resistance that graffiti once prided itself upon? It is undeniable that graffiti advertising has made the art form lose its organic quality. Therefore, even though the ability to seek consent may signal progression towards society's perception and openness towards graffiti art in public spaces, this may be counter-intuitive to the artist's purpose if it is their ultimate goal is to challenge the status quo.

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CC0001

This Is What Writing Feels Like

Robyn Catherine Nair



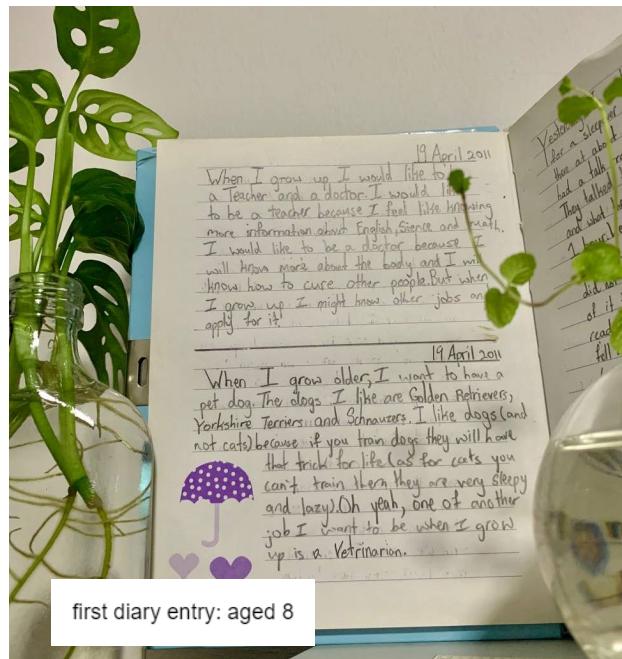
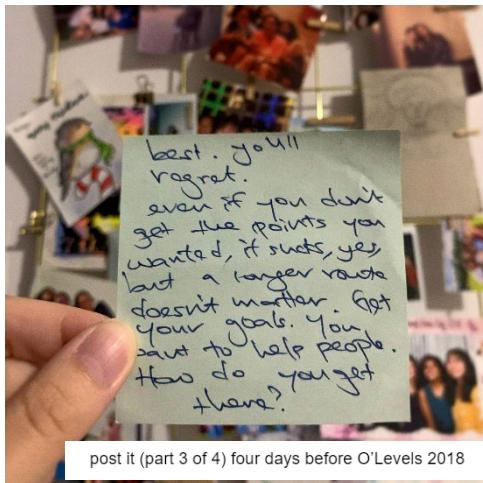
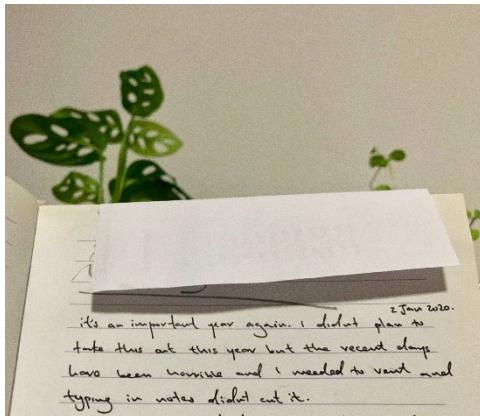
her dress swirls at her ankles. dynamic and messy, she dances to music unheard.
as the only colour set against the home she's in,
she is the main character.
everything else is imagined.

this is what writing feels like.

it feels like home. a release. like warmth spreading to the tippy tips of your fingers.

it's art.

– ever changing, ever evolving, no one seems to be able to come to a consensus on what's right or wrong.
your opinion is valid!
no matter how silly your reasoning may be.



Perhaps stemming from a habit of writing in journals since I was eight, writing has become a way for me to understand myself better—its style and medium used always evolving as I grow up. From paper to the notes application on my phone, to the mood tracker widget and bits of recycled paper I find, words seem to flow more smoothly there than if I had said them out loud.

Of course, the audience is not always myself—texts and academic reports and emails and Instagram stories are pieces of my writing sent out daily to the people around me. Certain schemas are set, discourse followed, when I address my words to

different groups of people. It is only normal after all, to code-switch even in writing.

Flipping through the pages of my unfinished notebooks (for never finishing any notebook is a great hobby of mine) and scrolling through my messages sent over the years, it amazes me how my writing style has developed over time. I used to write formal texts to teachers and the children I tutored with the hope of sounding smart and put together, meticulously picking on my word choice and punctuation before I hit send on that two-lined text.

But being a student leader through my years in

school has taught me that teachers sometimes prefer an air of friendliness in emails instead of the strict formality that was so ingrained in us through situational writing classes in secondary school. (Yes, I do realise this is a rather blanket generalisation.) Thus, the binary switch that I used for code-switching has morphed into more of a sliding control panel when writing to varying groups of people. Instead of writing based on formalities and rules, I write following emotions. Is that the new normal?

The written word is about 5,500 years old, stemming from the burnt sienna sands of ancient Mesopotamia.

If my writing style can change so much over the course of a few years, the standard and accepted English writing style (that is: the tone, language, and form) in the world must have been altered a billion times over.

If change really is the only constant, I wonder what the future of the written word looks like.

More interestingly, how is it shaped?

Termed the “essential introductory reading for students studying historical linguistics” in the book *Language Change: Progress or Decay?*, Jean Aitchison (2001) attempts to chart how language transitions between eras, why they evolve, why they die, and how they are reborn—exploring language change in its most basic form. He argues that language change is crucial as it allows us to articulate new ideas—“Keyboard smash” would not be in the common lexicon of people in the 1920s for

that action simply did not exist yet. He also pointed out that unlike what previous linguists thought, language may not have a built-in preference for simplicity. Just as history is written by the victors, our modern-day language is shaped by critics. Sometimes these critics come from a position of power, such as dignitaries trying to correct the “savage English” of laymen, or perhaps from people of more unassuming backgrounds simply seeking to codify the language.

In *Quantitative Patterns of Stylistic Influence in the Evolution of Literature*, Hughes et al. (2012) argue that time provides the most “coherent means of clustering works.” That is, authors were inclined to mimic the writing styles of fellow novelists or academics close to them in time. Through the charting of content-free words like “a,” “must,” “this” and the like, and clustering authors who had similar thematic content—think Shakespeare and Marlowe versus Darwin and Huxley—it was found that “short-term cultural evolutions” had shaped writing over the millennia, very much akin to the rise and fall of literary eras.

The cultural approach that Hughes et al. (2012) proposed shows how language change is more like a flowing river making its own course. These localised influences and organic changes are in stark contrast to the evaluative approach brought up by Aitchison (2001) where the critics deliberately modify the path of a language’s usage. Just as nature rejects the human influences to straighten a river, the meandering of language change is difficult to contain. Hughes’ (2012) argument thus adds on to that of Aitchison’s (2001) 11 years on, with the time-space compression bringing the world closer to each other than ever before.

A new trend is emerging in which we are no longer confined to the works of literary figures present in our time, geographical location, or culture. Global influences now have a role in language style. Be it governments, renowned authors, local dialects, digital enclaves—everyone has an opinion on what should or should not be included in the dictionary. It is no longer solely determined by those in power. Analysing Singapore's *Singlish* and the country's stance on language policies—from implementing the Speak Good English Movement two decades ago to *Singlish* now being officially recognised as emblematic to the country's identity—reveals just how hard it is for one body of authority to attempt to control the evolution of language.

English words are borrowed from different languages. Different languages take inspiration from English. The construction of any language is a collaborative effort, and we can only guess how many factors affect it.

Quoting Alex Bentley of the University of Bristol, “Language varieties are so much like dialects”—both sources attempt to explain how language is influenced, and which spheres of influence have a greater impact. But it really is not a competition between which factor has a greater power over the other. Even linguists argue about which theory better encapsulates its cause—maybe its function, foreign influence, fashion—fighting farcical feuds when language is really an ever-changing process with so many new elements constantly coming into play.

Through my years in school, many teachers have attempted to correct me on school-room grammar

and the “proper” way to start sentences. But if English is so subjective, with its rules bent daily, who is to say who is correct? Maybe both of us are wrong. Maybe neither of us is wrong. These “rules” of writing are not set in stone, but that is not to say that it is unimportant. It simply exists as the current societal accepted norm.

The state tried to banish the creole English once so commonly heard on the tongues of our granduncles and aunties—previously an ingenious way of allowing everyone to understand what they were saying, it is now uncouth to jumble different languages and dialects into a sentence. Singapore's only resource is its citizens, and English is a powerful medium through which we can communicate across borders. These “rules” are important; the state's reasoning was justified. But Singlish is not a “wrong” English, just a variation of it that we as a society have grown to love. Maybe we should keep this in mind when we find ourselves mocking the generations below us for creating new ways of expressing ideas and emotions.

Language is shaped entirely by its users.

Merely a way of communication, with everybody subject to their own interpretation, language is an art that evokes a sense of wonder and a deep feeling of home within me, but of course, it may mean something entirely different to you.

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Who Says Older People Can't Take Risks?

Vivien Lau Wai Wen



Just beside the Stadium MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) Station sits a large dome, known for hosting some of Singapore's biggest events like the Southeast Asia (SEA) Games, football matches and even Singapore's first ever BTS concert—Singapore Sports Hub. Interestingly enough, not many are aware of what lies underneath the dome—a hidden gem, where all the action takes place.

As I entered the vicinity, I was greeted by a cool and gentle breeze, a distinct contrast to the warm and humid air from the outside. I walked along the bright multicoloured track which surrounds the entire perimeter of the dome. At every bend around the

stadium there were groups engaged in their own activities. A family sat in a corner with their spread of McDonald's takeaway, while a group of older aunties were taking part in a Zumba class just a few metres away. Picking up my pace, my stroll turning into a light jog, I finally reached Gate 14—the skate park.

The crowd here was even livelier. All sorts of skaters were making use of the massive ramps and half pipes to show off their skills and tricks. Teenage boys made up the majority of the crowd, each with skateboards of their own unique designs and colours, skating up and down the big ramps, doing

impressive tricks mid-air. However, the stadium housed not just skateboarders, but many other “skaters” too. There were people on all sorts of skates attempting stunts on the ramps and pipes. One sight that astonished me was a young girl, around the age of five, with a rainbow tutu around her tiny waist and protective gear covering her knees, elbows, palms and head, rolling up and down the ramp on the smallest pairs of inline skates I had ever seen. She reminded me of Sky Brown, the youngest skateboarder in the world, someone whom I admired a lot while watching the last Summer Olympics.

Amused by the little girl, I started to wonder why skating is a sport dominated by young people. I then thought about other sports like boxing, cheerleading, and diving—these sports, either thought of as “risky” or involve dangerous stunts, are popular among the youth but hardly picked up by older people. This made me wonder if age is a limiting factor when it comes to “risk-taking” sports. Zooming out further, I wondered why the idea of risk is often associated with youth.

In society, older people are seen as less likely to engage in risky behaviour, and a study by Harvard student Kashia Rahman (2019) affirms this. Rahman (2019) claims that teenagers are the most daring group of risk takers, mainly due to the lack of maturation. Teenagers are often not experienced enough or possess the self-control to make sound and logical decisions resulting in higher engagement in impulsive and risky behaviours (Rahman, 2019, 01:16). For instance, nine out of 10 adults who smoke cigarettes daily first tried smoking by age 18 (Youth and Tobacco Use, 2022),

which led me to question if there is a specific point of maturation when we begin to think more about the consequences of our actions. Needless to say, of course, not all risky behaviours like smoking are good. While it may be a good thing that we “grow out of” our impulsive tendencies as we grow older, on the flipside, we may grow to be afraid of failure and taking risks.

Rahman (2019) claims that another cause of risky decision making is habituation. Risky behaviour has become a habit among many teenagers. After being exposed to risks without consequences, they become less frightened or guilty while attempting that action, resulting in them repeating the same risks in the future. Aside from harmful activities like smoking, there are other activities that teenagers tend to take part in that may be just as risky. In some cases, learning something new such as picking up a new sport, may also involve risks. This is evident as the average age of skateboarders is between 13 and 14, where 74% of skateboard injuries are considered extreme ones (Skateboarding Safety - RoSPA, 2022). Norms and behaviour are socially constructed around age. And it appears that young people are the most daring groups of risk-takers, as most skills are only taken up at a young age. So, why are teenagers usually the ones more keen on taking risks? And why is it that the older generation is not as keen to take up and master new skills?

The correlation between old age and learning is discussed by Istance (2015) in his study, where he claims that older people are actually a lot more capable than they seem, despite the ongoing perception that links old age with inability and

weakness. While we cannot deny that our reaction time slows down and our memory starts to decline as we grow older (Enayati, 2012), Istance (2015) argues that non-cognitive skills like “perseverance, teamwork and collaboration, even creativity” are expected to improve as we age (p.230). He further discusses how “active ageing” would be a better approach than the idea of “lifelong learning” that society currently promotes. The current approach may not be very effective as seen by the greatly perpetuated stereotype that the elderly are seen to have a decreased capacity to learn and master new skills. And this perception has led to elderly being afraid of engaging in risky behaviour and learning new skills overall. Istance (2015) believes that the concept of “active ageing” would be a better approach to getting the older generation to engage in learning where the fundamental principles of lifelong learning will be applied, but with a greater emphasis on encouraging older adults to learn and gain new skills. Thus, Istance’s (2015) argument shows that older adults are just as capable of learning and taking risks, as the younger generation is, debunking the current stereotype around age and learning.

On the other hand, as much as active learning should be encouraged, picking up new skills and learning something new is not easy for all. While it is true that maturation, as Rahman (2019) states, leads us to think more logically, it also pushes us into our comfort zone. As one ages and matures, they start to get more comfortable with their lifestyle. And as more responsibilities and duties start to pile up, we become less attracted to the thrill of risk and doing something unexpected.

While Rahman (2019) discussed how teenagers form habits of risky behaviour, we can also observe how adults form safe, predictable habits with little risk so that they don’t fail. As we grow older and conform to socially acceptable norms, we seem to associate failure with shame. For instance, not many adults are able to admit that they can draw or sing whereas most young children are not embarrassed to say that they can. When society is habituated to be more afraid of failure and stepping out of their comfort zones, the mindset that it’s “too late to learn” and the illusion that we are incapable of taking risks as we grow old starts to solidify. We often hear adults encouraging children to “learn while (they) still can.” Why don’t adults heed their own advice too? Why should learning stop in adulthood, or even in one’s golden years? There seems to be this belief that skills and experiences are best gained when young, which is strange because adults should be as equally, if not more, capable of doing things youth can, as argued by Istance (2015). In fact, it is never too late to learn how to swim. Swimming lessons are even available for senior citizens, as it is proven to improve one’s cardiovascular health.

We cannot deny that there are biological effects to ageing—you’d rarely see an elderly person hopping dangerously on a skateboard and swerving through the air with stunts. However, there are also instances of elderly people who go against stereotypes and push themselves mentally and physically by taking up sports like weight-lifting. Beyond sports, the idea of risk can also be applied to making different life choices and learning new things. I believe the process of habituation and adaptation can still be applicable at any age. Just

because most teenagers thrive on impulsivity and action does not mean that adults have to lose this element of fearlessness. Risk is not always a bad thing. While I certainly don't advocate for dangerous or irresponsible behaviour that sometimes comes with risky acts, there are times where we do need to have the courage to take some risks and venture into something new. I think it depends on one's priorities—take the risk for the reward or stay comfortable?

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CC0001

Our Personal Narratives: How Stories Shape Our Lives

Eduard Wikarta

There I sat, watching intently with bated breath as the artist lay carefully his canvas, ready to create his masterpiece. He begins with broad strokes of an azure blue, peppering it intermittently with fluffy blotches of ashen white and grey. Underneath, the land and its people basking in the aureus radiance of the dawn's first light, and the verdant trees towering over the soiled path left muddied and swamped from the monstrous monsoon rain the night prior.

The delicate tranquillity of the forest is unceremoniously shattered by a man, who through the musty and diaphanous silhouette of suspended dust, gallops frantically back the beaten path with a look of absolute terror plastered across his face.

I gasped. "WHAT HAPPEN NEXT WHAT?"

He, after a brief pensive pause, portrays a dastardly creature: piked ears and dark beady eyes; a dull brown snout with which it forcefully expelled each breath from its large barrel chest; muscular legs and pointed trotters in enraged motion.

"BOAR RUN YOU?" I gesture, mouth ajar. He nods in earnest agreement, and we both let out a chuckle.

His frantic leaps turn into fatigued lumbers as he warily turns his sweat-laden back to face his foe, which had already vanished back into the dense vegetation as mysteriously as it had emerged. An arduous victory to an anecdotal masterpiece, and one that was met with my most enthused of air-applauses!

At the conclusion of his entertaining story, I continued my interview with *Rafi*²⁵, the "artist." Indeed, he was not an artist in the conventional sense, but still an artist nonetheless: the "canvas" was his "signing space," his artistic "brushstrokes" the nimble movements of his expressive hands and varied facial expressions, and himself a deaf man vividly illustrating to me the story of a hilarious chance encounter with a wild boar.

This is in marked contrast to us hearing-folk, who use a different multitude of speech in our everyday lives: articulation, tone, pitch, stress, and volume, just to name a few. This enables us to convey

²⁵ Not their real names.

information and provide clarity where there is doubt. Additionally, it enables us to vary our everyday interactions with others by adding colour and flair to an otherwise monotonous string of words; it is what allows us to transform mere mechanical dictation into something which we all are intimately acquainted with, and something which humankind has done since time immemorial: storytelling! But how exactly does it influence our own identities and stories?

In “First we invented stories, then they changed us”: *The Evolution of Narrative Identity*, McAdams (2019), a professor of Psychology, Human Development, and Social Policy at Northwestern University, explains its saliency in what he terms the *Narrative Identity*: the “internalised and evolving story a person invents to explain how he or she has become the person he or she is becoming” (p.1) and explains how factors like culture and history come into play. Essentially, he asserts that stories dominate every imaginable aspect of our lives: remembering things chronologically enables us to reconstruct our past and anticipate the future; allows us to understand human intentionality and agency—that is, empathise with and understand others; and, most importantly, helps us construct a self-defining life narrative. To quote the writer Joan Didion: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”

Clearly, he has a point. What do the Epic of Gilgamesh, hot gossip around the office watercooler, witness testimony in court, and sombre moments of contemplation all have in common? They all involve the kaleidoscopic use of stories to elicit emotions and engage the mind, in ourselves and others. No other sentient species on

Earth share our deep infatuation with storytelling, and to this end we make significant use of this age-old art throughout our multitudinously, uniquely storied lives. Amidst the tumult of daily life, we encounter a great deal of different, and often novel, situations. Storytelling, through the idea of Narrative Identity, allows us to methodically process, share these encounters and, perhaps most importantly, our perceptions of said encounters. We, the captivated audience, can then connect to, sympathise with, and better understand the storyteller; to look at things from a different light; to expand our horizons and diversify our often-parochial perceptions in a nuanced world. From a cultural perspective, stories guide us on how we should act and think based on certain universal norms: the apologue “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” tells us not to abuse the trust and kindness of others; and that of Lt. Adnan at the Battle of Pasir Panjang reflects the importance of valour and tenacity.

Overall, storytelling inspires us to aspire to greater heights and guides our perception of the world—not to instruct us how to think, but rather what to think about. Evidently, the influence of stories on our lives is clear. But what would our lives be like if stories lose their relevance?

Tom van der Linden (2020) explores part of this idea in his video *Stories as Identities: Who Are We Without Them?*, especially the final episode in his three-part series. Van der Linden essentially asserts that a life without the structure of stories is pointless and nihilistic—stories form the basis of human interaction and mutual understanding, and a story-free world is ultimately antithetical to the core human ideas of creativity and expression, as well as

organisation and structure. From stories, we construct our self-identities from learned ideas of what it means to be “a man, a woman; ..., to be strong, to be weak; to be attractive, to be ugly; to be adventurous, to be boring” (van der Linden, 2020, 19:31) and consequently limit ourselves to preserve some semblance of rationality. He concludes with his centre-ground position: embrace our inner storytellers, but dismantle the structures inherent to stories as we know them. What remains, as he eloquently puts it, is “freedom, for ourselves, and for others. Freedom to break free. Freedom to be.” (24:21)

Indeed, McAdams (2019) and van der Linden (2020) agree that stories form the crucial yet sometimes imperceptible underpinnings of humanity. Stories allow us to delineate and parametrise principles which we use to construct our narratives, and by extension, our identities. Much like patchwork, we pick apart stories and choose from them the individual values we deem most salient to our lives. From here we weave them into the complex quilts which, over months, years, and decades, then become our metaphorical identity. It is thus the foundation of who we are—our joy, sadness, anticipation, bereavement, loyalty, courage. Without stories, there is neither a fear of nor possibility of acting out of character, for there is no story for which to act out of. To this end, we don’t just turn robotic and taciturn—we simply cease to be, destined to be emotionless vessels of sentience incapable of humanity. At the same time, however, a deep and unrealistic romanticisation of stories fundamentally twists our perception of reality. All too often, the narratives portrayed in popular media of the fallacious belief that the protagonist’s dogged

determination will kindle a long-awaited acceptance by an initially unrequited love (and similarly unrealistic narratives) are far-removed from the harsh truths of the real world—one that is, unfortunately, not as serendipitous, beguiling, straightforward, and dichotomous. Consequently, on a personal level, we begin to place ourselves at the centre of these artificially constructed facades in order to escape the mundanity, mediocrity, vexation, and perplexities of real life; to placate, or even satiate, our desire for that happily ever after with a crush; for that once-in-a-lifetime, jet-setting, world-saving adventure; or to be Scrooge McDuck-swimming-in-money rich. And in doing so, we end up slowly incorporating these values into our own Narrative Identities in a world which, to paraphrase van der Linden (2020), pressures people into an unnecessary competition for increasingly contrived adventures. However, the rude awakening comes (literally) when the Koel birds’ piercing calls echo around the estate on a sultry Monday morning, and we are left with nothing but misery and a tinge of disillusionment.

On a collective level, both agree that these stories are a reflection of wider social narratives like culture, with examples like the “American Dream” and the more locally-flavoured “Five Cs”—the physical manifestation of the Singaporean success story. From young, we begin to internalise the cookie-cutter stories which are fed to us by society—“Ah boy, you must study hard and get good job as Doctor! Older *oredi* can get credit card and condo, then find wife and have children *liaò*!” Ironic here is the fact that our establishmentarian society, whose conformist beliefs are so deeply entrenched and pervade every nook and cranny of daily life,

constantly espouses the importance of innovation and creativity—both of which are crucial tenets of individuality and expression.

It is thus incumbent on us to not only be objective and realistic, but at the same time reject the general narrative silently imposed on us by society—to have the courage to be creative and pursue freedom; to embrace the stories of others, but infuse in it our personal touch and let it be our guiding light; to truly be the masters of our own destinies.

Looking at him, I come to realise that Rafi has wholeheartedly embraced the overarching narrative that society has assigned to his person—that he is *only* a Deaf man. But it's evident to me that, as the captain of his own destiny, his narrative is beyond words; that words are incapable of fully encapsulating his prismatic identity. Yes, he is Deaf, but he is doggedly industrious, yet conscientious and virtuous; calculative yet occasionally impetuous; mature with a tinge of whimsy... and the list goes on.

Like Rafi, telling our own life narratives reveal the malleable and sometimes contradictory nature of our minds; from cradle to grave, we process and internalise everything we see, feel, touch as we live out our lives—our ideas, emotions, and thoughts in constant flux. The only thing that remains still in the midst of this cognitive whirlwind is ourselves. From everything here, we pick up our mental pens and

scribble out our self-narratives. So, as we navigate the winding path of life, it is essential that we break free of the cliché story that society expects of us; write the story of our own lives and don't let anyone else hold the pen. Only then can we let each stumble be the start of our own beautiful dance; each strikethrough be the seed that sparks a novel idea. Only then can we be *us*.

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CC0001

Forgoing the Visceral Pleasures of Life for Frivolous Pursuits

Magdalene Lim Hui Qi

White-washed interior, floor-to-ceiling glass windows; the usual crowd of young couples, expats and food bloggers differing only by the brand of their bag or watch, but otherwise homogeneous; an upbeat, almost revolting, mix of preppy voices and contrived accents taking up too much of the air. In other words, the holy trinity of any higher-end café in Singapore. Other notable features include: unjustifiably steep price points and food that is bland both in taste and character.

As I patiently await my food, two teenaged girls at a nearby table become an unlikely source of entertainment. Like an observer studying animals in a glass enclosure, I can identify a pattern in their behaviour. First, with phone cameras angled at obtuse positions, the girls take photos non-stop, posing with their food and other random café ornaments. Even a plain vase containing a singular stalk of flower is not spared. Just to be clear, these poses are by no means casual or easy. This could be the newest Olympic sport. The girls' heads are just about to dislodge from their necks with the way they are tilted for the photos. Next, they scroll through hundreds of photos to see if any is worthy of being shared with their social media followers. Alas! None is good enough. Even The Metropolitan Museum of Art never had such high standards for

the curation of art. With a look of readable disappointment, the process repeats itself. Indefinitely. This is not extraordinary behaviour, neither is it unique to these two girls. For most café-goers, meals are frequently accompanied by mandatory photographs shared and "socially-approved" on social media platforms. Only after both girls have achieved this, they finally dig in.

"The taste is so-so," one of the girls announces sheepishly. My eyes glaze over her order—some *plant-based, antibiotic-free, vegan-friendly* chicken rice for thirty dollars a plate before GST and service charge. The girl picks apart her expensive chicken rice with a blatant lack of excitement, struggling to down it. I almost pity her. Just like these girls who are paying premiums and sacrificing their taste buds for a couple of photos and social media posts, are we forgoing the visceral pleasures of life for frivolous pursuits?

In "Bloggers, Critics and Photographers in the Mediation of Food Consumption," Amy Tan (2015) demonstrates how consumer behaviour and worldviews in Singapore have been altered by food blogging. Expounding on Miller and Shepherd's (2004) theorisation on blogging as a social action, Tan (2015) explores the social dynamics of food

blogging and highlights the issue of class in this modern phenomenon. Food blogging is a form of participatory food journalism “anchored by the interactivity and immediacy of social media platforms” (Tan, 2015, p.86). Such characteristics of food blogging allow for two-way relationships; participants are both producers and consumers of food-related content, allowing them to simultaneously post about their own consumption patterns while privy to others’. The growing influence of food blogging enables “consumption messages and philosophies to permeate the community and individual consciousness with specific values, beliefs and practices” (Tan, 2015, p.190).

Leveraging on its interactivity and influence, food blogging can thus be utilised as an effective way to signal one’s status. Consumption of higher-end food can be interpreted as a way to signal one’s status through lifestyle choices. For example, posting about organic or café food, which is typically higher cost and consumed by the upper class, can convey (unreliable) information about one’s socioeconomic status. Under the guise of “food blogging,” we now have more opportunities than ever to flaunt our consumption purchases on social media platforms in order to signal wealth and social status. Curating our social media feed, posts and comments allows us to construct our public and online persona to minuscule precision. Drawing on Tan’s (2015) insights on the social dynamics of food blogging, perhaps the reason for many of our “inexplicable” consumption choices lies in their value as signals. Hence, our willingness to pay a premium for café food, and by extension higher

perceived value of said food, can be attributed more so to their value as signals than the pleasure and satisfaction we derive directly from it.

The young girls in the café are but a drop in the ocean of consumers fixated with the curation of their online and public image. Unlike the young girls who may be oblivious to what they are doing, the motivations for our consumption choices are more complex and diverse than we think they are, extending beyond the goal of status and wealth signalling. In his work *Consuming Life* (2007), renowned sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman sheds light on the relationship between consumption and identity formation. Bauman (2007) asserts that “identities are projects, tasks to be undertaken, diligently performed and seen through to infinitely remote completion” in the liquid modern society characterised by a condition of fleeting identities, relationships, and social experiences. According to Bauman (2007), consumer goods come complete with “identity supplied,” and identity construction “requires primarily shopping skills.” Since consumer markets are constantly clearing past offers for new ones, they breed a chronic dissatisfaction with acquired goods and identities by consumers. In the case of self-construction, the consumerist culture “forbids a final settlement and any consummate, perfect gratification that calls for no further improvement” (Bauman, 2007, p.114).

In the carnivalesque game of identities, the construction and deconstruction of identities become self-propelling and self-entertaining. Consumer goods thus become instruments for

identity formation in our consumerist society, as we base our consumption choices on the identities we wish to take on. In the liquid modern society that Bauman (2007) describes, we lodge ourselves in a vicious cycle where we claw and grasp desperately at hollow identities only for them to be rendered irrelevant and outdated once the next fashion season comes around or a new fad washes over us. Having to constantly consume to purchase new identities, scramble to discard the outdated and struggle to choose a new one, are all ailments plaguing liquid modern consumers. This begs the question, are we the true consumers or are we the ones being consumed in this insidious system? The reliance of identity formation on consumerism embodies a fatally nihilistic element which leads to a spiritual sickness. With our identities in a constant flux, the feeling of disorientation and desolation is heightened in today's world.

Drawing on both Tan's (2015) and Bauman's (2007) insights, it is evident that the motivations and reasons for consumption are nuanced and multilayered. Consuming for the sake of innate enjoyment has mostly been foregone, as consumption choices serve as proxies of the social status, lifestyle, well-being, happiness, values and life goals of the people consuming them. Picture this: a high-powered executive carrying a crummy Jansport backpack, a teenager reading *The Business Times* in between runs at a skatepark, or a socialite riding a public bus while dressed to the nines. All three scenarios are indubitably eyebrow-raising. Typically, our consumption and lifestyle choices fit our social and self-images. The moment

they don't, we feel a sudden jolting sense of discomfort. The discomfort we experience from any deviations from the image of ourselves is actually an indication of how rigidly and carefully we've constructed this image.

The Greeks had the maxim "Know Thyself." As Tan (2015) highlights the concept of conspicuous consumption as public signals and Bauman (2007) uncovers the role of consumption in identity formation and self-affirmation, perhaps we're too proud of the person we've constructed to notice what we're truly like in order to change properly and organically. We don't want to sacrifice that part of ourselves (who we think we are and who we want to be) meticulously engineered through a series of superficial tools, including our consumption choices. This part of our identity, involving some degree of delusion, enables us to maintain a positive, albeit extremely fragile, self-image in the absence of genuine effort.

At this point, the girls in the café, or any other ordinary consumer, might be wondering, *Am I anything more than a veneer?* To strip ourselves of our consumerism-defined images would be a painful but crucial, and hopefully rewarding, step in answering this question.

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HW0208:

Academic Communication in the Social Sciences



HW0208

The Effects of Actual Temperature and Thermal Comfort on Procrastination Among University Students in Singapore

Jillian Leong Wai Lam, Koh Jing Han, and Ngiam Wen Xun

Academic procrastination—the voluntary delay of action on academic tasks despite anticipating being worse off as a result (Gustavson & Miyake, 2017)—is so prevalent that, on the estimate, 80% of college students procrastinate regularly (O'Brien, 2000).

Previous research on procrastination adopted two perspectives: clinical and situational psychology (Klingsieck, 2013). Most studies attribute procrastination to an individual's internal state (Badri Gargari et al., 2011). Situational factors, however, have received little attention. Temperature, for instance, leads to procrastination, but similar research has not been conducted in a tropical climate like Singapore. The high humidity in Singapore amplifies thermal discomfort at high temperatures (Chow, 2021), and rapidly rising temperatures from climate change make an investigation pertinent. Thus, this study examines the correlation between actual temperature, thermal comfort and procrastination in Singapore.

Literature Review

Internal and external situational factors play crucial roles in influencing procrastination amongst university students. There is extensive literature on internal states related to procrastination. From the

clinical perspective, procrastination is associated with negative emotions like anxiety and stress. When task characteristics are misaligned with the students' goals and interests, negative emotions result, leading to disinterest in tasks (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013). Students then procrastinate to improve their moods. This, paradoxically, leads to negative feelings of regret and self-blame, thereby fueling further inaction (Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998).

The situational perspective examines situational and contextual factors like temperature. Alberto et al. (2021) established a causal link between temperature and study duration among college and high school students in the United States (US). The researchers observed that students replaced their study time with leisure activities with extreme temperatures on summer and winter days. As students were less adapted to extreme temperatures, they substituted their study time with weather-appropriate leisure instead. Thus, they tend to delay tasks more in climates they are unaccustomed to (Alberto et al., 2021).

This study by Alberto et al. (2021) investigated the effects of temperature on procrastination in the

temperate climate of the US, focusing on drastic temperature variations throughout all four seasons. Nevertheless, a tropical country like Singapore, with a smaller temperature range and fewer temperature fluctuations, has yet to be studied. Singapore's mean temperature is projected to rise by 1.4°C to 4.6°C by 2100 (Centre for Climate Research Singapore, n.d.). Singapore's high humidity amplifies the discomfort of high temperatures above 35°C (Chow, 2021). As a measure of temperature experience, thermal comfort is a subjective psychological state conveying satisfaction with or dissatisfaction with one's thermal environment (Dunn et al., 2004).

Hence, this study examines whether daily temperatures affect academic procrastination amongst Singapore university students. We propose two hypotheses, (1) the greater the deviation of actual temperature from the average 27.9°C of Singapore (Meteorological Services Singapore, 2021), the higher the procrastination level, and (2) the lower the thermal comfort experienced by participants, the higher the procrastination.

Methods

Participants

In order to assess procrastination habits and the thermal comfort of students during their respective study sessions, a Google Form was sent via Telegram channels to Singapore university students ($N=20$). Only those studying in non-air-conditioned venues were included in the sample. There were three Year 1 students, 12 Year 2 students, three Year 3 students and two Year 4 students.

Actual Temperature

Participants reported the date and time of their study session. Using Meteoblue, which provides archived hourly temperature data, temperatures of the sessions were obtained thereafter. Our analysis was based on averaging the temperature data across session intervals.

Thermal Comfort

A modified *ASHRAE Thermal Sensation Scale* developed in Hunan, China (Zhang et al., 2005) (Appendix A) was used. Tropical Singapore's temperature range is much smaller than temperate Hunan's. Henceforth, the scale range was reduced from a seven-point to a four-point scale. Also, the questions were modified to assess how comfortable students were, rather than gauge how hot, humid, or windy the environment was.

Procrastination Patterns

The *Academic Procrastination* (Lay, 1986) and *Active Procrastination* scale (Chu & Choi, 2005) were modified, combined, and adopted (Appendix B). The *Academic Procrastination* scale measures a student's general tendency to delay school work. Since this study investigates how temperature and thermal comfort influence procrastination, data was collected based on the specific day of response rather than general procrastination habits. General procrastination habits are insufficient for this study since they do not reflect the effect of temperature or thermal comfort. Hence, some questions were omitted or modified (Appendix C), while reverse-scored questions were checked for response consistency. Furthermore, questions from the *Active Procrastination* scale were added to

measure a student's intention to procrastinate (Zohar et al., 2019), which is another aspect of procrastination. Specifically, this scale measures the intentional decisions participants make to procrastinate, for example, those who deliberately wait until the last minute to finish a task. These questions allow us to identify various reasons behind a student's tendency to procrastinate, so as to narrow down on reasons associated with thermal comfort. In neutral response bias, participants falsely report via the neutral option to minimise cognitive effort in decision-making and increase social desirability by misrepresenting their procrastination habits (Edwards & Smith, 2014). To avoid this bias, a 4-point Likert scale was employed instead of a 5-point Likert scale to eliminate unmeaningful results.

Data Analysis

Using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), curve estimation and Pearson correlation analysis were run to test Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, respectively (Appendix D).

Results

The effects of two predictor variables, namely actual temperature, and thermal comfort, on academic procrastination are examined. The results are presented in the form of scatter plot graphs and correlation matrix. Only thermal comfort yielded a statistically significant result.

Figure 1

Scatterplot graph of Total Procrastination Score and Actual Temperature

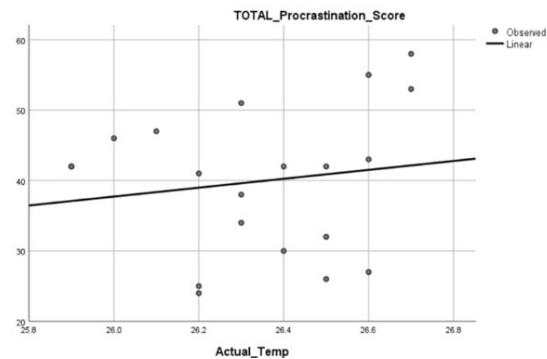


Figure 1 shows the linear relationship between the procrastination score and actual temperature. Generally, we detected a positive linear relationship between these variables. As the actual daily temperature increases, university students in Singapore procrastinate more. However, the correlation is not statistically significant.

Figure 2

Correlation Matrix of Total Procrastination Score and Total Thermal Comfort Score

		Correlations	
		Total_Thermal_Co mfort	TOTAL_Procrastination_Score
Total_Thermal_Co mfort	Pearson Correlation	1	-.454*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.044	
TOTAL_Procrastination_Score	N	20	20
	Pearson Correlation	-.454*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.044	
	N	20	20

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Based on Figure 2, the relationship between thermal comfort and academic procrastination is observed to be negatively correlated. The results shown above indicate a statistically significant linear relationship between these two variables, $r = -0.454$, $n = 20$, $p = 0.044$. The lower the thermal comfort, the

higher the procrastination level. Singapore university students tend to procrastinate more when they perceive the thermal environment as uncomfortable than those who have perceived it as comfortable.

Discussion

The study investigates the relationship between daily temperatures and academic procrastination amongst Singapore university students. There was (1) no significant relationship between actual temperature and procrastination, and (2) a significant negative correlation between thermal comfort and procrastination. The lower the thermal comfort, the higher the procrastination.

Actual Temperature and Procrastination

It is hypothesised that the more the actual temperature deviates from the average 27.9°C of Singapore, the higher the procrastination level. However, the actual temperature was not significantly correlated with procrastination, albeit showing an upwards trend (Figure 1).

From Alberto et al.'s study, greater deviation from the average temperature resulted in a higher procrastination level. On the contrary, our study established no significant correlation between the two factors. This could be explained by the small temperature range (25.4°C to 26.7°C) during the period of data collection. Thus, participants did not experience any extremely low or high temperatures, to the extent that it could have influenced procrastination.

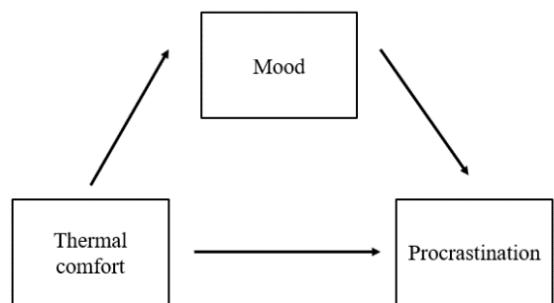
Thermal Comfort and Procrastination

The significant negative correlation between thermal comfort and procrastination suggests that the less satisfied respondents were with their thermal environment, the more they procrastinated. With no existing research to support or contradict this finding, it provides an interesting insight for future research.

The relationship between thermal comfort and procrastination may be mediated by mood. Thermal comfort has been found to correlate with negative mood. Lan et al. (2011) suggests when participants experienced lower thermal comfort, they felt greater fatigue and stress, which made them unwilling to complete tasks. Besides, mood correlates with procrastination (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013; Tykocinski & Pittman, 1998). Thus, it is likely thermal comfort influences mood and mood influences procrastination. This results in a mediation model where thermal comfort influences procrastination with mood as a mediator (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Mediation model of thermal comfort, mood, and procrastination



Implications

Climate change would worsen thermal comfort in Singapore (Chow, 2021). Since thermal comfort negatively correlates with procrastination, climate change may reduce students' engagement with the material after school, e.g. independent research. Students' learning and productivity may suffer if such a trend persists or worsens. To counter this, new construction projects under Urban Redevelopment Authority, particularly educational infrastructure and homes, may incorporate cooling materials to optimise students' thermal comfort. In turn, this may reduce thermal-discomfort-induced procrastination.

Limitations, Recommendations for Future Research

Firstly, a small sample size ($N=20$) threatens the generalisability and reliability of the results. Having a larger sample size will overcome this limitation.

Additionally, because of the limited temperature range (25.4°C to 26.7°C), procrastination data could not be obtained concerning more extreme temperatures. The study will have to be replicated over a more extended period of time to allow procrastination data to be obtained over a broader range of temperatures.

Finally, this was a correlational study where external variables, like student workload and conducive studying conditions, were unaccounted for. Instead, experimental studies would draw causal links by controlling for confounds between thermal comfort, actual temperature and procrastination. An understanding of the causal relationship between these three variables may

further persuade schools to employ temperature control strategies to improve students' comfort, well-being and study conditions.

Conclusion

In this study, the effects of temperature and thermal comfort on academic procrastination were examined. Academic procrastination is predicted by thermal comfort but not temperature. During our research, the small temperature range may account for our insignificant findings concerning temperature and procrastination. According to extensive research on mood and procrastination, mood may be a mediating factor between thermal comfort and procrastination. Hopefully, our study sheds some light on how temperature and thermal comfort influences academic procrastination. Our results serve as a basis for future research into the relationship between environmental factors and academic procrastination.

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Appendix A: Thermal Comfort Scale

- 1) The temperature in my current studying environment feels pleasant.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

- 2) The humidity of my current studying environment is uncomfortable.*

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

- 3) The ventilation in my current studying environment feels just comfortable.

- 4) How do you rate your thermal environment at this moment?

- 5) Overall, do you feel comfortable in your current studying environment?

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

*Question is reverse-scored

Appendix B: Academic Procrastination Scale

- 1) I put off my work until the last minute.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

- 2) I knew I should work on schoolwork, but I just didn't do it.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

- 3) I did not waste a lot of time on unimportant things. *

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

- 4) I was distracted by other, more fun, things when I supposed to work on schoolwork.

- 5) I concentrated on schoolwork instead of other distractions. *

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

- 6) I could only stay focused on schoolwork for less than an hour before I was distracted.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

- 7) My attention span for schoolwork was very short.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

8) I spent most of the study period doing non-academic work.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

9) When given an assignment, I usually put it away and forget about it until it is almost due.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

10) I found myself talking to friends and family instead of working on schoolwork.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

11) It's really a pain for me to work in this environment.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

12) I'm upset and reluctant to do schoolwork.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

13) I intentionally put off work to maximize my motivation.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

14) In order to make better use of my time, I intentionally put off some tasks.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

15) I managed to accomplish all the goals that I set for myself.

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 Strongly Agree

*Questions are reversed- scored

Appendix C:
Questions omitted and modified from the original *Academic Procrastination Scale* and *Active Procrastination Scale*

Questions from <i>Academic Procrastination Scale</i>	Omitted, modified, used directly
1. I usually allocate time to review and proofread my work.*	Omitted
2. I put off projects until the last minute.	Modified, see question 1 in Appendix A
3. I have found myself waiting until the day before to start a big project.	Omitted
4. I know I should work on school work, but I just don't do it.	Used directly
5. When working on schoolwork, I usually get distracted by other things.	Omitted
6. I waste a lot of time on unimportant things.	Modified, see question 3 in Appendix A
7. I get distracted by other, more fun, things when I am supposed to work on schoolwork.	Used directly
8. I concentrate on school work instead of other distractions.*	Used directly
9. I can't focus on school work or projects for more than an hour until I get distracted.	Modified, see question 6 in Appendix A
10. My attention span for schoolwork is very short.	Used directly
11. Tests are meant to be studied for just the night before.	Omitted
12. I feel prepared well in advance for most tests.*	Omitted
13. "Cramming" and last-minute studying is the best way that I study for a big test.	Omitted

14. I allocate time so I don't have to "cram" at the end of the semester.*	Omitted
15. I only study the night before exams.	Omitted
16. If an assignment is due at midnight, I will work on it until 11:59.	Omitted
17. When given an assignment, I usually put it away and forget about it until it is almost due.	Used directly
18. Friends usually distract me from schoolwork.	Omitted
19. I find myself talking to friends or family instead of working on school work.	Used directly
20. On the weekends, I make plans to do homework and projects, but I get distracted and hang out with friends.	Omitted
21. I tend to put off things for the next day.	Omitted
22. I don't spend much time studying school material until the end of the semester.	Omitted
23. I frequently find myself putting important deadlines off.	Omitted
24. If I don't understand something, I'll usually wait until the night before a test to figure it out.	Omitted
25. I read the textbook and look over notes before coming to class and listening to a lecture or teacher.*	Omitted

Questions from <i>Active Procrastination scale</i>	Omitted or modified
1. My performance tends to suffer when I have to race against deadlines*	Omitted
2. I don't do well if I have to rush through a task*	Omitted
3. If I put things off until the last moment, I'm not satisfied with their outcomes*	Omitted
4. I achieve better results if I complete a task at a slower pace, well ahead of a deadline*	Omitted
5. It's really a pain for me to work under upcoming deadlines*	Modified, see question 11 in Appendix A
6. I'm upset and reluctant to act when I'm forced to work under pressure*	Modified, see question 12 in Appendix A
7. I feel tense and cannot concentrate when there's too much time pressure on me*	Omitted
8. I'm frustrated when I have to rush to meet deadlines*	Omitted
9. To use my time more efficiently, I deliberately postpone some tasks	Omitted
10. I intentionally put off work to maximize my motivation	Modified, see question 13 in Appendix A
11. In order to make better use of my time, I intentionally put off some tasks	Modified, see question 14 in Appendix A
12. I finish most of my assignments right before deadlines because I choose to do so	Omitted
13. I often start things at the last minute and find it difficult to complete them on time*	Omitted
14. I often fail to accomplish goals that I set for myself*	Modified, see question 15 in Appendix A
15. I'm often running late when getting things done*	Omitted
16. I have difficulty finishing activities once I start them*	Omitted

* Indicates reverse-scored items

Appendix D: Syntax from SPSS data analysis

* Curve Estimation.

TSET NEWVAR=NONE.

CURVEFIT

```
/VARIABLES=TOTAL_Procrastination_Score WITH Actual_Temp  
/CONSTANT  
/MODEL=QUADRATIC  
/PLOT FIT.
```

CORRELATIONS

```
/VARIABLES=TOTAL_Procrastination_Score Total_Thermal_Comfort  
/PRINT=TWOTAIL NOSIG  
/MISSING=PAIRWISE.
```