THE MOTLEY

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RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL WORKS

LETTER FROM MANAGING EDITOR, SKYE MECKELBERG BAXTER

Since its inception, one of our primary goals in creating The Motley Undergraduate Journal has been to foster a space for connection between disciplines, stories, and people. In an age defined by constant communication, we find ourselves paradoxically more fragmented than ever. Notifications replace conversation; algorithms mediate intimacy; words are traded faster than they can be understood. Amid this digital din, we hoped to cultivate a site of community members looking to create connections with intention. This issue brings together student collaborators and creators who dare to slow down, listen, and rebuild meaning in the spaces where disconnection has taken root. They remind us that connection is not simply the exchange of information; it is an act of recognition, empathy, and care.

As a collective of editors, readers, and writers, we recognize that communication is never neutral. It carries power, history, and consequence. Our commitment to decolonial communication continues: we remain aware that the privileging of the written word has often come at the expense of oral and embodied forms of knowledge, particularly those of Indigenous peoples. We affirm our responsibility to resist that bias, to value storytelling, ceremony, and relationship as legitimate and vital forms of scholarship.

We acknowledge that the Motley Journal is created on the traditional territories of Treaty 7: the lands of the Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani Nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy; the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations of Bearspaw, Chiniki, and Wesley; and the Tsuut'ina Nation. This territory is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3, within the historic Northwest Métis homeland. The word "connection" takes on a deeper meaning when we recognize that this land has always been connected, through kinship, language, and story, long before colonial borders divided it. To connect is to remember.

In a time when our social and political worlds feel increasingly polarized, communication holds both danger and promise. It can entrench isolation, or it can rethread our shared humanity. The pieces in this issue explore that fragile tension. They examine how communication technologies, social movements, art, and media can alienate us or draw us closer together. They ask how we might build networks rooted in empathy rather than extraction, care rather than consumption, dialogue rather than dominance.

As ever, our gratitude extends to those who make The Motley possible. The Department of Communication, Media, and Film faculty at the University of Calgary continue to champion undergraduate scholarship with tireless dedication. We thank Dr. Maria Bakardjieva, Professor and Chair of Communication and Media Studies, and Editor-in-Chief of the Motley, for her wisdom and steadfast guidance. We are especially grateful to Dr. Maria

Victoria Guglietti, whose endless support, nominations, and mentorship continue to sustain this journal year after year. We also honour the vision of Melissa Morris, whose labour and leadership created the foundation upon which the Motley still stands.

To the professors and graduate students who reviewed submissions, offered thoughtful feedback, and supported our authors — thank you. To our student writers, your courage and insight remind us why this journal exists. Your work proves that scholarship can be both critical and compassionate, that to write is to reach out.

Finally, to you, our reader: thank you for choosing connection. By reading this issue, you participate in a quiet act of resistance against apathy and detachment. You remind us that communication with intention still has the power to build bridges across distance, culture, and time.

As I write this, I am filled with deep gratitude. This issue marks my last as Managing Editor of the Motley Undergraduate Journal. Over the past two years, I have had the privilege of working alongside brilliant peers, generous mentors, and fearless student authors whose ideas continually challenge and inspire me. To help shepherd their voices into print has been an honour beyond words. The Motley has shaped not only how I think, but how I listen. For that, I will always be grateful.

Thank you for allowing me to be part of this remarkable community. It has been an absolute joy.

In connection and gratitude,
Skye Baxter
Managing Editor, The Motley Undergraduate Journal

NOTES FROM THE MOTLEY OFFICES

Research only goes so far as its readers, so a final thank you to the readers of the Motley Journal. Your interest and engagement with communications research is the sunlight giving the journal life, shining a warm light onto the scholarship we seek to promote.

Sheroog Kubur
Junior Managing Editor

THE EDITORIAL TEAM

MARIA BAKARDJIEVA
Editor in Chief

Dr. Maria Bakardjieva (she/her), Professor and Chair in Communication and Media Studies at the University of Calgary. Her research examines the social construction of communication technologies and the use of digital media in various cultural and practical contexts with a focus on user agency, critical reflexivity and emancipation. She has numerous publications in leading journals and influential anthologies. The books she has authored and co-edited include Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life (2005), Socialbots and Their Friends: Digital Media and the Automation of Sociality (2017), Digital Media and the Dynamics of Civil Society: Retooling Citizenship in New European Democracies (2021), and How Canadians Communicate (2004 and 2007). Between 2010 and 2013, she served as the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication. Her current projects investigate the role digital media plays in citizen engagement and democratic participation. Dr. Bakardjieva teaches courses in communication theory and research methodology, communication technology and society, digital media and democracy. She works to promote undergraduate research activities in Communication and Media Studies and engages in knowledge mobilization and community outreach intended to advance the public understanding of issues related to Communication and Media Studies.

SKYE BAXTER
Managing Editor

Skye Baxter (she/her) is the Managing Editor of The Motley Undergraduate Journal at the University of Calgary, where she is in her final year of degrees in Communication and Media Studies with a minor in Statistics, as well as Political Science with a minor in Global Development. After two years in the role, this issue marks Skye's final publication with Motley. Her time with the journal has been defined by a deep commitment to fostering community, mentorship, and accessible platforms for undergraduate research and creative expression. A recipient of the PURE Research Award and a Chancellor's Scholar, Skye's academic work explores the intersections of communication, global development, and social justice, particularly how discourse shapes our understanding of sustainability and decolonization. Beyond academia, Skye can often be found reading in a corner with her dog or performing a monologue on the nuances of Hamlet, a text she believes is never quite finished revealing itself. She hopes to pursue graduate research and eventually teach at the university level, continuing to champion storytelling as a form of collective inquiry and change.

SHEROOG KUBUR
Junior Managing Editor

Sheroog Kubur (she/her) is the Junior Managing editor of the Motley Undergraduate Journal of Communications. She is in her final year as a political science and communications student, with a background in journalism and community-focused volunteer work. She has become a longtime supporter and volunteer to the journal, looking forward to bringing her editorial and research experience together in this new role. Sheroog's journey into undergraduate research started after publishing her first article with the Motley into journalism studies and local practices. Since then, she has worked to combine her two disciplines in her studies, writing her honours thesis on digitally-mediated social movements and developing a PURE project looking into the social media practices of global right-wing leaders. This year she was also the recipient of the Best Undergraduate Paper in Political Science, writing about the ways in which digital technologies are used as tools of simplification for states.

OLGA BARCELO
Outreach Coordinator

Olga Barcelo (she/her) has been our Outreach Coordinator since December 2024. She was inspired to be part of a team that has been able to bring a variety ofvoices together in the Communications and Media Studies faculty. She will be graduating this fall with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Media Studies. She currently works as a Constituency Assistant for a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. She hopes to pursue graduate studies in the future. She regards her family as one of her biggest inspirations. As her mother is a political refugee from Chile, and her father is an immigrant from Chile, she is incredibly interested in listening to the voices of the oppressed and ensuring all voices are heard.

BRANDON EBY
Peer Reviewer

Brandon (they/them) is a master's student in Sustainability Studies at Trent University and peer reviewer with Motley Undergraduate Journal. Their current area of research is on emergency preparedness in the context of rising human made ecological disasters. They completed their undergraduate degree in Sociology from the University of Calgary in 2024, and were involved in student groups such as Students for Direct Action, The Kula Ring, and the UCalgary Sociology and Law & Society Association. They are involved locally with medieval reenactment and research groups in Peterborough, and look forward to continuing as a peer-reviewer with Motley.

ISMAYIL IMANLI
Peer Reviewer

Ismayil Imanli (he/him) is double-majoring in Political Science and Sociology. He is an aspiring lawyer with a deep interest in social scientific inquiry, which draws him to work with The Motley. One of his favourite areas of research, which he is writing a monograph on, is the comparative analysis of Insurgency and State Violence in different polities and times. Another motivation for his work with the Motley is engaging with academic activities outside of the lecture halls. In his free time, he enjoys learning music theory and playing piano. He is looking forward to working with different authors and the editorial staff.

SEBASTIAN VASQUEZ GUTIERREZ
Peer Reviewer

Sebastian (he/him) is a copyeditor and peer reviewer who started in the fall of 2023. He has always been interested in Investigative journalism; his inspiration Sebastian has written for different newspapers where he discussed his struggles being an International student at UCalgary. He interviewed other students in similar positions, which further shaped his work. At Queensland University, he was involved with a group of journalists who investigated the gambling industry in Australia. Sebastian hopes to pursue a career in investigative journalism.

DAMAN PREET SINGH
Peer Reviewer

Daman (they/them) is a third-year communications student with a strong interest in journalism and the visual arts. Their research interests lie where communications and culture theory intersect with identity, pop culture and subcultures, while also learning how to communicate their findings through art mediums. Currently, Daman works as a freelance photographer, a regular contributor to the *Reverie*, and is keen on learning how communication theory can affect their work, in both journalism and photography.

TAYLOR VAN EYK

Peer Reviewer

Taylor is a Masters student in the department of Communication, Media, and Film at the University of Calgary. She contributes to the Motley as a peer reviewer, and previously as an author. Her work is inspired by her roots as an Anishinaabe Ike and her love for alternative culture. She holds a B.A in Communications and is currently working towards an M.A in the same field. Currently she holds a day job advising in the energy sector. This year she hopes to do more travelling and rekindle her artistic practices.

NICKEY GOULDEN

Peer Reviewer

Nickey (she/her) is a recent graduate of the Communications and Media program at U of C, and continues her work as a peer reviewer with the Motley. She currently enjoys her job as an art instructor downtown, and is hoping to pursue her goals in an artistic career soon. She enjoys reading, rock climbing, and writing in her free time, but her true love is film (and nachos).

HANNAH ADRIANO
Peer Reviewer

Hannah (she/her) recently graduated from the University of Calgary with a major in Communications and Media Studies and a minor in Business. She has a strong interest in uncovering the multi-layered, complex meanings of representations in popular culture and dissecting how hegemonic discourses manifest themselves in contemporary media landscapes. She is currently working as a communications intern for WEDO Canada and hopes to pursue a career that intertwines her passions in writing, digital media arts, and creativity.

MAGGIE HSU
Peer Reviewer

Maggie (she/they) is a fifth-year Communication and Media Studies student with professional interests in social media management, community engagement, and journalism. Her research explores digital intimacy through online personas, fandoms, and influencers, with a particular focus on livestreaming, parasocial relationships, and gaming culture. Maggie is also passionate about sports journalism, where they aim to share human interest stories that reveal how sports intersect with broader cultural narratives, transcending their reputation as a niche pursuit of fanatical audiences. They are dedicated to exploring how sports function as a dynamic form of media and storytelling that reflects societal values and identities.

MATAYA HOFLAND
Peer Reviewer

NATASHA BODNARCHUK
Peer Reviewer

Natasha Bodnarchuk (she/her) is an author, peer reviewer, and copy editor for The Motley Journal. She recently graduated from the University of Calgary with a BA in Communications and Media Studies with Honours. When she's not reading essays that critically examine how people and stories are framed in media, she can be found mountain biking, skiing, or spending time with her friends. She looks forward to reading the other undergraduates work!

THE AUTHORS

ARESSANA CHALLAND

From Telegraphs to AI: The Gendered History of Feminized, Affective Labour in Communication Technologies

Aressana Challand (she/her) is a recent graduate of Communication and Media Studies (Honours) at the University of Calgary. She is currently working in ESG with an interest in law.

JENNIFER MCMURRAY

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: A Moral Exploration of Illness and Accountability

Jennifer L. McMurray (she/her) is passionate about exploring complex questions, piecing together answers, and sharing her discoveries in a clear and accessible manner. With a major in Communications and Media Studies and a minor in History, she enjoys researching topics that blend these fields, bringing an interdisciplinary perspective to her work.

EMILY SKIPP

Queer Pop Stardom: Chappell Roan and the Radical Potential of Pop Music

Emily Skipp (she/her) is a Bachelor of Social Work student at the University of Waterloo. She previously completed a Bachelor of Arts in Honours Social Development Studies at the University of Waterloo, graduating with Dean's Honours. She is passionate about social work, particularly supporting families and children, and fostering inclusive, supportive communities. For this journal, Emily was excited to branch out from her usual studies to research and write about one of her favourite artists, Chappell Roan, and her contributions to queer visibility and pop culture. This project allowed her to explore themes of identity, belonging, and community, connecting directly to her broader commitment to social work and understanding how creative expression can reflect, empower, and support diverse populations. Emily hopes her work highlights the importance of inclusion and representation in both cultural and social contexts.

ALI ZAKRESKI

Matt Johnson: The Rise of a Maple Syrup Auteur: From Found Footage to the Founder of Blackberry

Ali Zakreski is a fourth-year undergraduate student in film studies at the University of Calgary. Ali also holds an undergraduate degree in sociology from the University of Saskatchewan. Her research interests include Canadian film history, American film history, and mockumentary films. She is passionate about film festivals and has volunteered for CUFF, CIFF, and the Okotoks Film Festival. Ali aspires to be a film programmer, with a focus on short films and supporting new talent in gaining recognition. She plans to continue her studies at the University of Calgary by pursuing a master's degree.

From Telegraphs to AI: The Gendered History of Feminized, Affective Labour in Communication Technologies

Aresanna Challand

Abstract

Women's underrepresentation in high-tech roles derives from the historical, political and economic forces embedded in communication technologies. The advancement of Artificial Intelligence risks deepening this gender gap by replicating and displacing feminized labour. This paper employs a feminist, Marxist, political economy framework to examine the historical and contemporary marginalization of women's labour in communication technologies. Henceforth, this paper asks, 'How has the historical feminization of women's labour in communication technologies shaped the structural gender gap in today's digital economy?". Tracing the feminization of women's labour from the telegraph, typewriter and telephone to modern technologies like the computer, social media and AI, this study exposes the patriarchal social dimensions of communication commodities that maximize profit through feminized labour while isolating women to subordinate, 'soft' roles. Findings emphasize that historically, women's affective labour was deemed economically suitable to operate communication technologies due to traits stereotypically associated with femininity, through attentive, emotional and submissive behaviour. Although female labour was foundational to technological advancement, this work was precarious. Simultaneously, the female gender became naturally attached to the identity associated with communication technologies. In today's digital economy, women retain soft roles as social media labourers. Artificial Intelligence, exemplified by female digital voice assistants, mechanizes this feminized labour. Traditional gender norms have been embedded in digital systems, where AI automates the affective labour historically performed by women, intensifying their displacement to precarious gig work and reinforcing historical inequities. By illuminating the social forces shaping communication technologies, this paper argues that the persistent gender gap in the digital economy is rooted in the historical feminization of labour. As AI automates affective labour, it is apparent that communication technologies are primed to continue excluding women from an industry ripe with power and profit.

Keywords

Women's Underrepresentation in Tech

As technological innovation advances towards a future reliant on Artificial Intelligence (AI), women remain significantly underrepresented in high-paying information and communication technology (ICT) jobs, the widest gender disparity of any discipline (Hegewisch et al., 2019, pp. 39, 46; UNESCO, 2019a, as cited in Collet et al., 2022, p. 39; Vu, 2023, para. 1). Despite efforts to increase the participation of women in the workforce, only 24 per cent of tech workers across Canada are women (Vu, 2023, para. 1). Across the technologically advanced, G20 nations, only seven per cent of ICT patents are created by women (West et al., 2019, p. 5). The pay gaps, increased difficulty in attaining senior positions, gender biases and common placements to precarious roles remain prevalent, systemic barriers that compromise women's representation in the upper echelons of the tech industry (Collet et al., 2022, p. 12). Low female participation in ICT makes the industry male-dominated, excluding women from coding the technologies of the digital economy, which both limits women's economic advancement and impedes global economic growth (Hegewisch et al., 2019, pp. 39, 46; Holder, 2019, para. 5; Hupfer et al., 2021, para. 2; Munshi and Wakefield, 2024, para. 9; O'Mara, 2022, para. 2; Ozdenoren, 2023, para. 3; Vu, 2023, para. 1; West et al., 2019, pp. 5, 16, 33). Today, the technological prominence of social media, AI and automation reflects the "'fourth industrial revolution'" (Schwab, 2016, as cited in Wajcman and Young, 2023, p. 47). Despite being new media, the patriarchal power-dynamics of old media continue to be perpetuated in these technologies by inflating women's economic marginalization. Technology wields power, yet women remain deeply absent from its frontline. As innovation continues, women's largest occupations are increasingly at risk of replacement by automation from AI tools (Hegewisch et al., 2019, p. 52; Ozdenoren, 2023, para. 3). Analyzing women's marginalization in the digital economy requires a feminist, historical, political economic examination of their labour in early communication technologies.

Feminist, Marxist, and Political Economy of Women's Labour in Communication Technologies

This paper utilizes a feminist, Marxist, political economic approach to examine the gendered social relations of communication commodities and labour that became feminized. The political economy of communication interrogates the power relations that guide the distribution

of communication technologies as commodities (Mosco, 1988, p. 3, as cited in Lee, 2006, p. 191). Importantly, Marx identifies this power as a set of social relations that are integral to the functionality of capitalism (Fuchs, 2018, p. 522; Mosco, 2009, p. 4). Comprising the 'political' power aspect of political economy, these social relations include the commodity, labour, and exploitation as socially constructed features of the economic system (Fuchs, 2018, p. 522). Feminist political economy perceives these social relations as gendered and historically constructed (Martin, 1991, p. 6). Further, understanding the materiality of these social relations necessitates a theory of history where, "(f)or Marx, history meant, above all, how people make themselves through labor" (Mosco, 2009, p. 4).

Henceforth, I combine a feminist political economy perspective with Marx's historical materialism to ask, 'How has the historical feminization of women's labour in communication technologies shaped the structural gender gap in today's digital economy?'. Tracing the historical feminization of women's labour across key communication technologies, I examine the contours of a patriarchal capitalist system that profits and maintains a male-dominant power structure by relegating women to the 'soft' roles of affective labour. I argue the underrepresentation of women in tech originates from the early communication industry's commodification of feminine gender norms. As such, I reveal how these gender constructs persist in today's digital economy, as AI perpetuates the historically feminized role of affective labour through voice assistants, displacing women from the workforce that early communication technologies created while reinforcing their economic marginalization by driving them into precarious labour.

A Historical Analysis of Women's Feminized, Affective Labour
The Telegraphist

As one of the earlier mechanized forms of communication technology, women dominated the telegraph's labour market, where work was feminized and tied to women's affective traits. Specifically, the term 'affective' refers to the emotional qualities of female behaviour that infuses itself into labour. Affective traits relate to emotional capacities, such as one's aptitude to care, listen, comfort, smile, and be gentle, and appeal to a gendered kind of labour as these characteristics have been historically constructed as female qualities (Altomonte, 2015, para. 1; Bergen, 2016, pp. 102-103). Hence, 'affective' labour references work that relies on the labourer to provide an emotional service to the consumer that creates what Bergen (2016) notes as an

"affective change" (pp. 102-103), highlighting the comfort or positive feeling that a consumer receives from the interaction. This work usually focuses on administrative, secretarial tasks that build and sustain client relationships, serving consumer needs best with a patient, sympathetic and flirty feminine persona (Bergen, 2016, p. 104; Duffy and Schwartz, 2017, p. 2975).

To study the historical construction of women's attachment to affective labour in early communication technologies, a combination of a feminist, Marxist perspective of labour highlights how patriarchal gender norms confined women's work in early communication technologies to roles that expectantly mobilized their emotional work. These gendered social relations granted women wages only upon conforming to patriarchal values that positioned women as the submissive, caregiving sex. Telegraphy arose as a gendered occupation, with women dominating Canada and the United States' telegraph labour market by the late 1800s (Balka, 2002, p. 60; Standage, 1998, p. 105). This commodity profited from the feminized labour that was exclusively sourced from the attentive nature and nimble fingers of young women (Mullin, 2016, pp. 2, 21).

Despite supporting the formation of a working women's middle class, the telegraph, a product of a patriarchal capitalist system, exploited women's labour and reinforced domestic gender norms. Telegraphists provided "ten hours a day, six days a week" (Standage, 1998, p. 105) of tedious labour; a skill that women had honed through long hours of housework spent knitting or playing an instrument (Standage, 1988, p. 105). It was women's soft, caregiving demeanour that best suited them as telegraph operators, channelling their perceived emotional traits into an 'affective' sort of labour that required their femininity. Hence, the telegraph established the female gender as innately tied to the operation of the machine (Mullin, 2016, p. 19). Women's affective labour continued to be sourced in emerging communication technologies like the typewriter and the telephone, fuelling the commodity's profits, while alienating women to secretarial roles as the preferred mediators of communication technologies.

The Typewriter and The Telephone Operator

Like telegraphy, the occupation of the typewriter and the telephone operator relied on the type of feminized, affective labour deemed best suited to women. Typing emphasized "(w)omen's slighter fingers" (Mullin, 2016, p. 5), while the telephone operator required women's "'skillful hands'" (Martin, 1991, p. 59) and a soft, "even-tempered" voice (Watchman, 1898, as

cited in Martin, 1991, p. 59). Women's distinct, constructed femininity enabled both commodities' success as an economic product through the feminine, adept typing of the scripts required by male colleagues, or by manually connecting the company to its customers as telephone switch operators (Bergen, 2016, p. 103; Martin, 1991, p. 12). Profit was contingent upon women's affective labour through their 'natural' ability to fulfill the emotional, strenuous labour requirements as the typewriter and telephone's mediator.

Initially male-dominated, telephone operation became a female role as the gender whose "personalities were 'better suited' to the work" (Martin, 1991, p. 52) than men's short temperaments (Jewett, 1936, as cited in Martin, 1991, pp. 54-55). Gender is an integral social relation tied to communication commodities, where "the female operator was considered 'the most valuable asset that a telephone company possesses'" (Bell Communication Archives, 1904, as cited in Martin, 1991, p. 59). However, the typewriter and the telephone isolated women's work within new occupations that provided no opportunity for career growth, little pay, and poor working conditions (Lipartito, 1994, pp. 1077, 1085, 1088; Martin, 1991, p. 60). The correlation of technological innovation to women's economic marginalization and the exploitation of their labour persists in computing.

The Computer Operator

As computer technology progressed, women were shunted from jobs in coding as the first 'computer operators' and sequestered to the feminized roles of 'soft' ware. During World War II, women powered ENIAC, America's first computer, automating complex mathematical calculations (Hicks, 2017, as cited in Wacjman and Young, 2023, p. 53; Hicks, 2018, para. 5; Light, 1999, p. 455; Thompson, 2019, para. 7, 26; West et al., 2019, p. 20). Importantly, women's role as the "'computer operator'" (Light, 1999, p. 469) positioned them as intermediaries of the machine, or society's early coders. The computer labour market, like earlier communication technologies, relied on the feminized labour of female operators to power the commodity.

The significant gender gap in today's coding occupations (Carretero et al., 2017, as cited in West et al., 2019, p. 5; Hegewisch et al., 2019, p. 43; UNESCO, 2019a, as cited in Collet et al., 2022, p. 40; Hupher et al., 2021, para. 2; Munshi and Wakefield, 2024, para. 9; O'Mara, 2022, para. 2; Vu, 2023, para. 1; Zhang et al., 2021, as cited in Collet et al., 2022, p. 40) is connected to the computer's early association as a site of male power during the ENIAC project,

as the commodity advanced and ushered in new ways of processing information. During this gendered pivot, women were isolated to the feminized roles of 'soft' ware. The ENIAC project reinforced gendered roles, where "designing hardware was a man's job, programming was a woman's job" (Light, 1999, p. 469). Thus, software roles became associated with the traditional attentiveness of female labour (West et al., 2019, p. 20). Women's occupational feminization continued to reproduce their subordination to the service-oriented roles of technology, while coding occupations became dominated by the male-exclusive culture of a patriarchal, capitalist system.

Women's Economic Marginalization in Today's Digital Economy

The Social Media Content Creator

Women comprise the undervalued 'soft' roles in today's digital economy, including the feminized, affective labour of social media. While women represent only 25% of technical roles in large tech companies (Hupfer et al., 2021, para. 2; O'Mara, 2022, para. 2), they makeup 70 to 80 per cent of the social media workforce (Balonon-Rosen, 2018, para. 5; Escaño and Prodanovic, 2023, p. 54; Hempel, 2018, para. 3). Female social media managers and content creators perform affective labour by engaging with online audiences, building brand-consumer relationships and easing customer frustrations through their empathy and attention to detail (Balonon-Rosen, 2018, para. 10; Duffy and Schwartz, 2017, pp. 2973, 2975, 2981, 2982-2983; Hempel, 2018, para. 12). The 'soft' skills that are associated with affective labour in a patriarchal, capitalist economy are undervalued despite its emotional toll. Within the news industry and platform economy, social media is one of the few occupations where women outnumber men in leadership roles (Escaño and Prodanovic, 2023, pp. 54-55; Levinson, 2015, para. 4). However, these roles afford women no growth in political, economic or social power as they remain invisible workers behind such accounts. Therefore, gendered occupational divides in the digital economy appropriate feminized, affective labour to ensure the online brand's maximum profit while maintaining women's underrepresentation in high-tech roles. Consequently, women's underrepresentation in tech heightens their risk of displacement by automation.

AI, Automation and Gig Work: The Female Digital Voice Assistant

The newest innovation in an increasingly digitized economy, Artificial Intelligence, replaces the administrative jobs created by earlier communication technologies. Women comprise a small portion of high-tech jobs**,** representing 24 per cent of tech workers in Canada (Vu, 2023, para. 1), less than one-third of the global tech workforce (Munshi and Wakefield, 2024, para. 9) and 10-15 per cent of AI researchers at the top technology companies (Stathoulopoulos and Mateos-Garcia, 2019, as cited in Wajcman and Young, 2023, p. 50; WIRED and Element AI, 2018, as cited in West et al., 2019, p. 88). Mostly, women remain concentrated in the administrative, secretarial roles that AI tools seek to replace (Ozdenoren, 2023, para. 2, 3). The legacy of women's historical marginalization to affective labour created a confined, occupational reliance on the secretarial, soft roles of the digital economy.

Now, feminized roles that favour women's affective labour with technologies like the telephone and computer, such as data collection and administrative support, are most at risk of being replaced by automation (Agar et al., 2018; Balka, 2002, p. 73; Frey & Osborne, 2017, as cited in Collet et al., 2022, p. 32; Hegewisch et al., 2019, pp. 16, 26, 28, 29; Servoz, 2019, as cited in Collet et al., 2022, p. 33; Manyika et al., 2017a, as cited in Hegewisch et al., 2019, pp. 11-12; Marr, 2024, para. 2). As such, women comprise 47 per cent of the United States workforce but 58 per cent of those whose jobs are most at risk of automation (Hegewisch et al., 2019, p. 11). While automation replaces women's work, it retains traditional gender norms through the affective, now mechanized labour of female digital voice assistants like Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa and Microsoft's Cortana.

Digital voice assistants act as automated secretaries, reinforcing female gender norms of care and occupational subordination (Bergen, 2016, p. 103; Collet et al., 2022, pp. 10, 26; West et al., 2019, p. 4). Coordinating the words and requests of primarily male customers or male-owned businesses, technology's female identity reflects women's historical role in serving male interests as the mediator of communication technologies. Female voice assistants like Siri, Alexa and Cortana support the profit-driven, patriarchal initiatives of capitalism by performing the invisible, always-on labour that relies on the user's "associations between the feminine and affective labour" (Bergen, 2016, p. 97). This affective labour echoes the work of telephone switchboard operators, as mobile phone voice assistants respond to more than one billion requests per month (UNESCO et al., 2019a, as cited in Collet et al., 2022, p. 61). Further, as

female telephone operators "possessed a 'good voice'" (Watchman, 1898, as cited in Martin, 1991, p. 59), Apple and Amazon selected a female voice assistant because "people prefer a female voice to a male voice" (Sey and Hafkin, 2019, as cited in, West et al., 2019, p. 95). As such, the profit-guarantees of affective labour maintain communication commodities as a site of male power and capital, while this automation pushes women into precarious gig work.

Through a feminist lens, female digital assistants reinforce female gender constructs of submission through the commodity's coding to placate toxic complaints and verbal harassment, akin to the work of female telephone operators and social media managers. Having been created by male-dominant teams (West et al., 2019, p. 100), these digital assistants lack agency or coding to counter harassment. In its infancy, Siri replied to insults like "You're a bitch" with "I'd blush if I could", while Alexa and Cortana offered similarly placating responses (UNESCO, 2015, as cited in West et al., 2019). Today, Siri continues to dodge verbal abuse without explanation, through neutral responses like, 'I won't respond to that'. As the digital economy progresses, voice assistants are not only housed in mobile technology but are implemented throughout software, aiming to enhance companies' operational efficiency. For example, GreenWorks ESG, a software for companies to manage their Environmental Social Governance (ESG) data, is powered by Ellie, a female AI assistant able to sort through spreadsheets, pinpoint data, and provide ESG recommendations (GreenWorks ESG, n.d.).

A subtle but powerful gendered shift in work, AI virtual voice assistants automate and replace traditionally female occupations, pushing women into precarious gig work in the platform economy. In Canada, women consistently outnumbered men in gig work from 2005-2016 (Jeon et al., 2021, as cited in Salter, 2023, p. 7), a number that widens year over year as AI becomes more sophisticated. Recently, gig work includes labour that promotes heavy surveillance, such as data labellers, content moderators, and domestic or customer service work provided by digital platforms (Collet et al., 2022, p. 34; Holder, 2019, para 21; Salter et al., 2023, p. 19; Williams et al., 2022, para. 3). Gig work commodifies women's labour through a "highly gender segregated" (Hegewisch et al., 2019, p. 51) system that values labour through client ratings on digital apps like Uber and Task Rabbit (Hegewisch et al., 2019, p. 51; Ziegler et al., 2020, as cited in Salter et al., 2023, p. 7). Client ratings expose women to gender discrimination and lower pay, while gig work keeps workers alienated from traditional workplaces (Salter et al., 2022, pp. 20, 36). As such, automation replaces women's affective labour while reproducing

traditional gender norms, further subordinating women to the power of a patriarchal, capitalist digital economy that determines women's isolated work and low pay.

Conclusion

Female digital voice assistants replicate women's historic role as mediators of the telegraph, typewriter, telephone and computer. These feminized communication roles, historically and in today's digital economy, reflect a patriarchal capitalist system that maximizes profit from gendered commodities and reinforces women's inferiority in economically stratified, feminized and undervalued, soft labour roles. Today, AI has begun to impact this affective labour, displacing service and administrative jobs primarily held by women with interactive digital voice systems (Balka, 2002, p. 73). This digital shift sustains domestic gender norms; while companies profit from feminized digital assistants, these gender stereotypes perpetuate the historical norm of women's role in caregiving by "articulat(ing) out of date views in a high-tech vernacular" (Collett et al., 2022, p. 26). AI not only jeopardizes specifically women's labour (Reuters, 2025, para. 1) but also reinforces gendered expectations that push women to find temporary, short-term labour in the growing gig economy (Das and Kotikula, 2019, as cited in Collett et al., 2022, p. 27).

Women's primary placement in communications roles of affective labour, now diminishing due to the recent development of automation, accelerates their economic marginality. As AI advances, the precarious labour of gig work becomes more viable, but does not provide greater economic opportunity. Characterized by temporary, short-term contract labour, the gig economy appears to offer flexibility, but lacks the economic stability, adequate wages, and social and health protection meant to afford workers a high quality of life (Salter et al., 2023, pp. 7, 12, 20). For women, gig work often entails platform labour, such as caregiving and cleaning services, resulting in labour of increased surveillance, instability and low pay (Salter et al., 2023, p. 22). Almost half of the US and Canadian workforce engages in this precarious sector (Salter et al., 2023, p. 12). Echoing Wajcman and Young's (2023) observation, the AI-driven expansion of the gig economy does not signal the closure of the gender gap but increases women's economic vulnerability, further limiting their access to tech positions.

Evidently, communication technologies retain the social relations of a patriarchal gender hierarchy through commodities that seemingly require feminized labour in a capitalist economy.

The gender gap in today's ICT industry reflects women's historical confinement to feminized labour roles. This paper sought to trace the historical feminization of women's labour in early communication technologies to its persistence in AI and women's continued marginalization in the ICT industry. Further communications research can explore a broader socio-cultural analysis with political economy, examining how constructions of gender inequality intersect with class, race, ethnicity and immigration status. Ultimately, it is imperative to remain critical of new technologies to examine their role in sustaining and increasing the risk of women's economic marginalization. As AI and automation become more advanced, these technologies can and do amplify systemic inequities by coding traditional gender norms into the machine while driving women into the precarious labour of gig work.

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Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: A Moral Exploration of Illness and Accountability

Jennifer McMurray

Abstract

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is a complex and often debilitating condition characterized by persistent fatigue accompanied by a variety of additional symptoms that often include muscle pain, cognitive impairment, and post-exertional malaise. Despite affecting millions worldwide, CFS remains poorly understood and frequently stigmatized. This paper explores historical and contemporary social perceptions of CFS, framing them within broader discussions of health, morality, and personal responsibility. By drawing on parallels to conditions like neurasthenia and hysteria, this research examines how societal values—particularly those shaped by the Protestant ethic and eugenics—have influenced perceptions of illness and morality. It highlights how attributing unverifiable illnesses to personal responsibility affects societal attitudes toward those with CFS. Additionally, this paper explores the gendered dimensions of CFS, historically linked to women yet increasingly recognized in men. Recent developments, including the condition's overlap with long COVID-19, emphasize the ongoing need for research and improved treatment strategies.

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), also known as Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME), is a complex and often debilitating condition marked by persistent, unexplained, or relapsing fatigue. This fatigue is of new or definite onset (not lifelong), unrelated to ongoing exertion, not significantly relieved by rest, and lasts for at least six months. In order to be diagnosed, the condition must also result in a substantial decline in occupational, educational, social, or personal activities. In addition, at least four of the following symptoms must occur simultaneously: cognitive difficulties (such as memory or concentration issues), sore throat, tender lymph nodes, muscle pain, joint pain without swelling or redness, headaches that are new in pattern or severity, unrefreshing sleep, and post-exertional malaise (PEM) (Graves et al., 2024). PEM, a hallmark of CFS, involves a worsening of symptoms following minimal physical or mental exertion, with effects that can persist for hours, days, or even weeks beyond the activity that triggered it (Friedman, 2019, p. 2). While there is evidence that CFS often manifests after an acute infection such as mononucleosis, Lyme disease, or Q fever, its exact cause remains unclear, as no consistent infectious agent has been identified. (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 458). Despite affecting millions worldwide, CFS remains poorly understood, and those living with the condition frequently face skepticism from both society and the healthcare system.

The classification and interpretation of CFS have long been contentious, particularly concerning its origins—whether it is biological or psychological. This debate goes back to at least the late 19th century, when a similar condition was first identified as a distinct disorder. Despite ongoing recognition and research into its causes, CFS and related conditions have remained stigmatized. This enduring stigma stems from deep-seated societal values and ideologies that shape perceptions of health (Crawford, 1997, p. 404). In his 1997 article, "Health as a Meaningful Social Practice," Robert Crawford argues that health is more than a biological or medical concept—it is also a symbolic and ideological construct that both reflects and reinforces societal values, identities, and power structures (p. 404). The way health and illness are communicated influences perceptions of character and shapes broader understandings of a moral and virtuous existence (Arney and Bergen, 1984, as cited in Crawford, 1997, p. 404). Thus, to fully grasp health practices and their societal impact, one must examine historical and contemporary knowledge, medical practices, and the political and economic forces that shape health discourse (Crawford, 1997, p. 404).

Historical records spanning centuries document the existence of disorders with symptoms resembling those of CFS and reflect society's evolving struggle to understand and contextualize such conditions within a broader framework. In the 18th century, Scottish physician George Chyene described a widespread nervous disorder in England that was characterized by anxiety, depression, and hypochondria. Cheyne attributed these illnesses to the excesses of modern English life, highlighting how social behaviours and values could worsen health problems. He particularly noted the detrimental impact of overindulgence in food, alcohol, and fashionable lifestyles, which often included late nights and wanton behaviour (Porter, 2001, p. 33). This perspective laid the groundwork for future discussions linking health to moral responsibility.

In 1869, American neurologist George Beard introduced the term 'neurasthenia' to describe a state of nervous exhaustion that had become prevalent in the industrial era (Porter, 2001, p. 39). Beard linked neurasthenia to the overwhelming demands placed on the nervous system by rapid modernization, citing factors such as urbanization, immigration, mechanization, and advances in communication (Porter, 2001, p. 39). Neurasthenia was characterized by a cluster of symptoms, including profound fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, headaches, insomnia, phobias, nightmares, digestive issues, depression, anxiety, impotence, and heart palpitations (Porter, 2001, p. 39). Beard observed that the condition primarily affected the affluent, who were heavily involved in the pressures of modern life, particularly through mentally demanding education and careers. However, Beard also noted a high prevalence of neurasthenia among upper-class women, who, since the Age of Enlightenment, had increasingly pursued intellectual activities. These women were believed to experience heightened stress due to their increased cognitive exertion compared to their rural and lower-class counterparts (Porter, 2001, p. 39). Despite its widespread occurrence and debilitating symptoms, in an era that had fully embraced science and medicine through a lens of reason, observation, and empirical evidence, neurasthenia struggled to gain full recognition as a legitimate illness within the medical community. Instead, it was frequently dismissed as hysteria, weakness, malingering, or feigned illness (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 455).

During this period, the concept of 'hysteria' loomed large in medical discourse, commonly attributing a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms to supposed dysfunctions of the uterus or ovaries in women, but also to sexual frustration and masturbation in men (Marland, 2001, p. 22). Hysteria was not merely considered a medical condition; it was also deeply tied to

ideas of moral decline, emotional instability, and irrationality (Marland, 2001, p. 29). Those diagnosed with hysteria were often seen as lacking willpower, self-discipline, and moral fortitude, with their symptoms interpreted as a failure to meet social expectations and responsibilities (Marland, 2001, p. 29). Moreover, individuals who reported symptoms that could not be objectively verified were frequently met with suspicion, and their illness was often dismissed as malingering—an attempt to avoid work or gain sympathy (Marland, 2001, p. 29). These prevailing attitudes reinforced the belief that conditions like neurasthenia were not genuine illnesses, but rather signs of laziness, self-indulgence, or deceit, reflecting broader societal values regarding health, morality, and personal responsibility.

Societal beliefs linking illness to morality were deeply influenced by the Protestant work ethic, a concept extensively explored and analyzed by sociologist Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Grounded in Protestant Christian values, particularly those of Calvinism, this ethic emphasized productivity, resilience, diligence, and piety as expressions of devotion to God. It promoted individualism, self-discipline, and the notion that economic success was a testament to one's moral virtue, an essential factor in maintaining social respectability (Crawford, 1997, p. 405). As the early 20th century progressed, a growing appreciation for leisure appeared to challenge the Protestant ethic (Crawford, 1997, p. 405). However, rather than rejecting traditional values, leisure was redefined to align with them. Leisure time was not meant for 'slacking,' but for fostering physical vitality, rejuvenation, and self-improvement (Crawford, 1997, p. 405). It was believed that failure to use leisure time productively would lead to negative consequences (Crawford, 1997, p. 405). These deeply ingrained ideologies continue to significantly shape societal views on illnesses like CFS, often linking the conditions to personal failings.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the rise of eugenics and shifting attitudes toward work, leisure, and health significantly influenced societal perceptions of illness and morality. Eugenicists warned that civilization was at risk of decline due to the unchecked reproduction of the unfit and unhealthy, framing genetic weakness as a primary threat to societal progress (Crawford, 1997, p. 406). This perspective was reinforced by theories suggesting that nervous collapse could be linked to hereditary deficiencies in physical capacity (Schofield, 1902, p. 102). One such theorist was British physician Alfred T. Schofield, who argued that functional nerve diseases affected individuals across all social classes, not just the affluent (Schofield, 1902, p.

102). In his 1903 work, *Nerves in Disorder: A Plea for Rational Treatment*, Schofield emphasized the increasing strain on the nervous system in an era where financial success depended more on mental exertion than physical labour. He wrote, "Money now is almost exclusively made at the expense of the wear-and-tear of nerve, as contrasted with muscle tissue; and it is a matter of ever-increasing importance to keep the money-making machine, the brain and the mind, at the highest productive pitch—in short, in a state of perfect health" (p. 4).

Eugenics fueled anxieties about an impending epidemic of hereditary degeneration, warning of "a reproductive triumph of lower types who would physically, mentally, and morally weaken and eventually destroy the social body" (Crawford, 1997, p. 406). While often associated with Nazi Germany, eugenics was widely accepted and institutionalized across many nations from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and several European nations implemented eugenics-based policies aimed at discouraging or preventing reproduction among those deemed 'unfit.' During this era, health and physical fitness were regarded as essential to societal progress. Exercise and sport were promoted as critical tools for strengthening the individual body and ensuring the human race's competitive edge (Crawford, 1997, p. 407). Those who failed to prioritize their health were seen as neglecting both their personal duty to self-improvement and their broader social responsibility to uphold health principles for the collective good (Crawford, 1997, p. 407).

Although eugenics was eventually discredited as pseudoscience by the scientific community (Wilson, 2024) and the influence of Christianity has waned in the Western world, deeply rooted ideologies continue to shape societal views of bodies deemed wasteful, unproductive, and non-donating to the greater social good. This condemnation is apparent in the way fatigue is perceived, often linked to personal moral failings and associated with slovenliness, one of the seven capital vices (Hardy, 2022, p. 43-44). Rather than eliciting sympathy, fatigue is frequently regarded as a physical manifestation of an individual's failure to uphold moral responsibility—namely, the duty to maintain one's health in order to remain productive (Radley & Billing, 1996, p. 221). These historical perspectives underscore the moral implications of CFS and how societal values and ideologies continue to influence the perception of illness. By framing health in moral terms, society often stigmatizes those with conditions like CFS, attributing their illness to a lack of self-discipline or personal responsibility. Understanding

these deeply ingrained beliefs is crucial for addressing the stigma and improving the lives of those affected by CFS.

While Beard had identified a widespread disorder resembling CFS in the mid-19th century, his hypothesis had been dismissed by his peers. They had rejected the notion that it could be a nervous system disorder caused by excessive mental activity, instead attributing the disorder to a mental condition, such as hysteria or a moral failing, such as a reluctance to work. However, as similar outbreaks were reported over time, the idea of CFS as a biological disease of the nervous system began to be reconsidered, with evidence suggesting that it could be contagious. One such outbreak occurred at Los Angeles County Hospital in 1934, and another was documented by British physician Edward Acheson in 1956 (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 458-459). Acheson coined the term Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME) to describe a neurological illness that affected both staff and patients at London's Royal Free Hospital in 1955 (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 458-459). Symptoms included severe fatigue, muscle weakness, pain, sensory disturbances, memory loss, and emotional instability (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 462). Acheson theorized that these symptoms were the result of inflammation of the brain and spinal cord (encephalomyelitis) that had been triggered by an unidentified infectious agent (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 462) Acheson also noted that some patients had experienced similar episodes in the past, suggesting a potential chronic or recurrent condition (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 462).

ME was not widely accepted as a legitimate diagnosis within the medical community. Critics of Acheson's work argued that there was no evidence of inflammation or infection in the nervous system (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 462). In 1970, psychiatrists Colin Peter McEvedy and Alfred William Beard revisited the 1956 outbreak at the Royal Free Hospital and concluded that it was a case of mass hysteria. As part of their reasoning, they pointed to the higher incidence of the illness among females compared to males (McEvedy & Beard, 1970, p. 7). This reinterpretation mirrored the skepticism that had surrounded the concept of neurasthenia a century earlier (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 462), which also noted a higher prevalence amongst women. Other psychiatrists suggested alternative explanations, such as conversion disorder (a condition in which a person has neurological symptoms—like paralysis or blindness—with no physiological cause) or somatoform disorder (a mental health condition in which a person feels highly distressed or anxious about physical symptoms that are not traceable to a physical cause).

These theories proposed that ME might be rooted in psychological distress rather than organic disease (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 462).

McEvedy and Beard's reassessment of the Royal Free Hospital outbreak coincided with a significant cultural shift in the mid-1970s, when health issues and their solutions were increasingly viewed through the lens of individual responsibility and control (Crawford, 1997, p. 408). This emphasis on personal accountability for health resonated with an individualistic culture that had once embraced eugenics and continued to associate hard work with moral integrity (Crawford, 1997, p. 408). This mindset was instrumental in the rise and normalization of neoliberal ideals, which emphasized personal responsibility, self-reliance, and minimal government intervention. By framing health as a personal matter, this perspective both reflected and reinforced neoliberal values, embedding them more firmly into the social ethos.

In the 1980s, the focus on health broadened to include not just physical well-being but also mental and spiritual wellness (Crawford, 1997, p. 410). This holistic view of health introduced an even wider moralization, where failing to achieve—or at least strive for—health was often seen as a failure to fully embrace life, understand one's emotions, or appreciate spiritual aspects. And when discussions about health are linked to personal responsibility, it is common to encounter views like those expressed by Canadian author, academic, and sometime politician Michael Ignatieff, who in 1988, stated, "We not only get the diseases we deserve: we get the diseases we want" (Ignatieff, 1988, p.29 as cited in Crawford, 1997, p. 411). Such rhetoric not only provides an opportunity for self-congratulation on the state of a person's good health but also offers an opportunity for moral judgment of those experiencing poor health, with little consideration for health matters outside a person's control. Therefore, it is important to critically examine the societal beliefs about health and the implications for those who do not experience good health or fail to conform to the dominant health ideals of the time.

In the late 1980s, another outbreak of a condition resembling CFS/ME occurred in the Lake Tahoe/Incline Village area of Nevada (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 458-459) and drew significant media attention. The illness was dubbed 'yuppie flu,' a term reflecting the perception that it primarily afflicted middle-to-upper-class professionals ("Yuppie Flu," 1989). Discussions surrounding the condition often extended beyond medical explanations, suggesting that these young professionals, who were often characterized by their fashionable lifestyle, materialism,

and financial success, were responsible for their own illness and attributed the disorder to their relentless drive in an ambition-fueled culture (Hunt, 2018, p. 175).

This period coincided with the second wave of feminism, which is largely agreed to span from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. Amid this wave, social roles of women were evolving, and many women were juggling multiple responsibilities, including careers, marriage, and parenthood. Media narratives, such as the one presented by Dr. Howard Seiden in a 1987 Toronto Star article, often suggested that women's attempts to 'have it all' were the root of their illness. Seiden's article presents a fictional medical case—implied to reflect a broader trend—of a woman seeking advice from multiple experts and exploring alternative therapies to combat her overwhelming fatigue. When doctors recommend that she slow down, she dismisses their advice and instead pursues alternative perspectives. Seiden goes on:

And, when one seeks, it comes to pass that one finds… Could a new or recurrent infection with EBV [Epstein-Barr Virus] cause Yuppie Flu? If only it were true. Then, we could tell everyone with non-specific symptoms that they were suffering from chronic Epstein-Barr virus infection. They'd regain their dignity. It wasn't that they couldn't cope with the hectic pace. No, sir, it was a nasty virus (Saiden, 1987).

Seiden's fictional medical case serves to argue that the woman's refusal to take personal responsibility for her fatigue is merely an attempt to preserve her dignity in the face of those who 'know better.' When media narratives like Seiden's gain traction, they can shape societal interventions and influence risk governance practices (Hunt, 2018, p. 179). The moralization of fatigued working mothers who are eventually diagnosed with CFS can fuel social scrutiny and self-doubt, prompting questions about whether a mother's participation in the paid workforce is so potentially harmful to the family unit that it is not worth the risk. The framing of 'yuppie flu' reinforces this notion, suggesting that the condition results from excessive ambition or greed and that a woman's professional success comes at the expense of family stability. These narratives not only shape how individuals navigate their roles within the family, workplace, and society but also reinforce broader societal expectations of motherhood. Whether someone is perceived as too lazy or too ambitious, unexplained fatigue is often framed as a failure of personal responsibility or moral character, with those affected frequently regarded as burdens on society.

Because a definitive organic cause for CFS remained elusive, researchers in the 1990s revisited psychogenic explanations for the disorder (Franssen, 2020, p. 408). In *The*

Psychopathology of Functional Somatic Syndromes (2004), Peter Manu and eleven colleagues compiled findings from their research at the University of Connecticut Health Centre between 1986 and 1993. They examined patients with functional illnesses—conditions characterized by persistent, distressing physical symptoms without measurable physiological changes. Their findings suggested that such illnesses were often linked to psychological factors such as neuroticism, excessive health-related anxiety, and maladaptive coping strategies (Manu, 2004, p. 4, 197). Neuroticism was identified as a common trait in many individuals before the onset of CFS and was thought to influence the severity of physical symptoms (Manu, 2004, p. 197). Manu's data also indicated that CFS patients reported a significantly higher incidence of sexual and physical abuse compared to the control group, reinforcing prior research that associated experiences of abuse with neuroticism, poor self-reported health, heightened pain perception, and multiple unexplained physical symptoms (Manu, 2004, p. 211).

However, individuals diagnosed with CFS often resisted acknowledging any psychiatric component to their illness (Manu, 2004, p. 2). In many cases, symptom severity worsened when evaluation and treatment shifted toward psychological therapy after no clear biological cause was identified (Manu, 2004, p. 4). Additionally, skepticism expressed by others regarding the legitimacy of their condition tends to reinforce patients' conviction that an undiscovered physical cause must exist (Larun & Malterud, 2007, p. 24, as cited in Franssen, 2020, p. 410). This resistance to explanations involving personality traits and maladaptive coping strategies may stem from an awareness of stigmas surrounding psychological disorders. Patients may fear being perceived as "weak of character" or undeserving of support (Radley & Billing, 1996, p. 222, 227). Moreover, having their motivations questioned can be particularly distressing as it undermines a patient's sense of self-worth and personal agency (Radley & Billing, 1996, p. 228). Research indicates that the ability to diagnose a disease—its 'diagnosability'—plays a crucial role in how patients perceive and manage their condition (Clarke & James, 2003, p. 1393 as cited in Franssen, 2020, p. 410).

Reports from hospitals and specialty practices treating CFS patients predominantly highlighted the disorder's impact on women (Evengård et al., 1999, p. 457), and until 1999, the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) operated its CFS programs through the Office of Research on Women's Health (Friedman, 2019, p. 3). However, more recent studies indicate that 35-40% of CFS sufferers are men, suggesting the condition does not predominantly affect

women (Friedman, 2019, p. 3). The ongoing portrayal of CFS as a disorder primarily affecting women has reinforced its association with conditions historically tied to female irrationality. This gendered perspective may have led to the misdiagnosis of men by overlooking the possibility that they, too, could be affected and thus denying them representation in medical research on the disorder.

The hypothesis that CFS may result from infection-induced immune deficiency in individuals who have experienced an acute illness (Unger et al., 2016, p. 1437) has long been debated. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has reignited interest in this connection, as many individuals with long COVID exhibit symptoms strikingly similar to those with CFS. Recent research suggests that a significant proportion of long-term COVID patients meet the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) diagnostic criteria for CFS (Hwang et al., 2023, p. 2). Moreover, a large-scale study of 3,762 long COVID patients across 56 countries found that 56.8% experienced PEM, the hallmark symptom of CFS (Hwang et al., 2023, p. 2). These findings reinforce the theory that CFS is a post-viral condition, suggesting a possible infectious component. This aligns with research from the past decade that increasingly challenges the notion that CFS is primarily a psychological disorder. Instead, while acknowledging that CFS may contribute to reactive depression in some patients, emerging evidence supports a physiological basis for the condition (Unger et al., 2016, p. 1434).

Despite advancements in understanding CFS, managing the condition remains a global challenge, with significant disparities in treatment approaches and availability (Friedman, 2019, p. 2). In many low- and middle-income nations, both the general population and healthcare professionals are unfamiliar with the concept of CFS. In contrast, high-income countries in Northern Europe, North America, and Oceania (Cho et al., 2009, p. 117) frequently endorse cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) as a means of modifying patient behaviour and thought patterns (Friedman, 2019, p. 2). Some countries fully recognize CFS as an organic disease but struggle with devising effective treatment regimens without a definitive cause (Friedman, 2019, p. 2). Additionally, many global health authorities advocate for the recognition of CFS as a legitimate biological illness and question the appropriateness of continuing to treat CFS as a potential mental disorder (Friedman, 2019, p. 2). While perceptions of CFS vary among health communities worldwide, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), currently classifies CFS under "Chapter 8: Diseases of the

Nervous System," and it is designated as 8E49 Postviral Fatigue Syndrome (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.). Proposals to relocate CFS to "Chapter 1: Certain Infectious or Parasitic Diseases" prompted the WHO to conduct a comprehensive literature review (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.), which ultimately found insufficient evidence to classify CFS as an infectious disease (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.). As a result, in ICD-11, issued in 2018, CFS remains classified under Diseases of the Nervous System until further evidence justifies reconsideration. (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.).

The historical and contemporary understanding of CFS has been deeply influenced by societal attitudes, cultural beliefs, and scientific frameworks. From its early associations with neurasthenia and hysteria to its current recognition as a complex and debilitating condition, CFS has been shaped by evolving perceptions of health, morality, and personal accountability. The portrayal of CFS as predominantly affecting women may have led to the misdiagnosis of men, highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach to diagnosis and treatment. Recent developments, such as the recognition of long COVID symptoms resembling those of CFS and the ongoing debate over its classification within the ICD, underscore the importance of continued research. By improving our understanding of CFS, we can develop better treatment strategies and reduce the marginalization of those who suffer from this condition.

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Queer Pop Stardom: Chappell Roan and the Radical Potential of Pop Music

Emily Skipp

Abstract

Chappell Roan, an emerging talent in queer pop music, challenges traditional heteronormative ideals through camp aesthetics, drag culture, and storytelling. Her debut album, The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess, offers a genuine portrayal of queer identity, rooted in her experiences growing up in conservative Missouri. This paper examines Roan's music and performance style through the lenses of queer theory and camp, emphasizing her critique of compulsory heterosexuality, gender norms, and the commercialization of queerness in pop culture. Tracks like "Pink Pony Club" and "Good Luck, Babe!" showcase her defiance against societal expectations, presenting aspirational visions of queer liberation. Roan's use of exaggerated femininity and theatricality aligns her with queer pop icons while creating a space for LGBTQ+ fans to engage in radical self-expression. Her embrace of drag culture and bold humour further challenges rigid concepts of gender and sexuality, highlighting pop music's potential as a platform for queer world-building. Ultimately, Roan's artistry redefines the landscape of queer pop stardom, highlighting the significance of representation that is both celebratory and revolutionary.

Keywords

Queer pop music, Chappell Roan, Camp aesthetics, Drag Culture, Compulsory heterosexuality, LGBTQ+ representation, Pop stardom, Heteronormativity, Queer world-building

Introduction

Chappell Roan, originally named Kayleigh Rose Amstutz, became a prominent name in queer pop music with her debut album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*. Growing up in the conservative town of Willard, Missouri, Roan's exploration of queer spaces had a significant impact on her musical journey, helping her develop a colourful, campy persona known for eye-catching performances, such as her six-foot-wide butterfly wings at Coachella (Jarrett, 2024). Influenced by pop legends like Lady Gaga and Madonna, her lyrics explore themes of lesbian identity, self-acceptance, and the struggles between being true to oneself and conforming to societal expectations in songs like "Pink Pony Club" and "Good Luck, Babe!" This paper will address how Chappell Roan's use of camp aesthetics and drag culture positions her as a queer pop icon, challenging compulsory heterosexuality in the current sociopolitical climate.

Through humour, camp aestheticism, and storytelling, Roan creates a space for queer expression in pop music, challenging the notion of the 'Midwest princess' within a heteronormative society. This paper presents a theoretical framework on queer representation and camp aesthetics, delves into Roan's lyrics and themes as critiques of heteropatriarchal standards, and investigates her use of camp aestheticism and drag to reconstruct and perform queer identity. It also examines how her whiteness and Midwest identity influence her persona and concludes by emphasizing her significance in queer pop culture and the engagement of LGBTQ+ fans.

Theoretical Framework

Chappell Roan's work, when examined through the lenses of queer theory and camp aestheticism, reflects queer identities in pop culture and pushes back against heteronormativity: celebrating a variety of gender and sexual identities. In contrast to mainstream pop artists like Katy Perry and Rita Ora, who have faced criticism for commodifying queerness and engaging in queerbaiting (Parahoo, 2020, p. 26), Roan's work reflects authentic community. Queerbaiting "could be defined as producers and purveyors of media implying queer content in order to lure in viewers and then not following through" (Nichols, 2020, p. 1462). Roan's music serves as a true expression of her queer journey, offering an earnest portrayal that resonates deeply with LGBTQ+ audiences (Bradley, 2018, p. 30). This authenticity nurtures a sense of community, underscoring the power of queer-created media to mirror and affirm lived experiences. (Bradley, 2018, p. 10).

Roan also embraces camp, an aesthetic with rich historical ties to queer culture. Camp aestheticism initially emerged as a discreet yet defiant form of self-expression, using humour to challenge rigid heteronormative norms that marginalized nonconforming identities (Coons, n.d., p. 71). It has since become a crucial talking point in public discussions of popular culture, merging comedy with political commentary to question mainstream views and promote queer visibility within the music industry (Coons, n.d., p. 71). As Coons (n.d.) emphasizes the transformative potential of camp aestheticism, they note that it "redefines what is considered normal" (p. 77). Roan's exaggerated, playful style exemplifies this by prompting audiences to reconsider traditional ideals of femininity and masculinity. She uses humour and theatricality as entertainment, but also as a critique of rigid gender and sexuality norms. In this way, her work demonstrates how camp aestheticism can operate as both a celebratory and rebellious tool, opening a space for queer expression and challenging heteronormative expectations in queer culture.

This performative side of Roan's work aligns closely with Judith Butler's concept of gender and gender performativity (1999). As Butler explains, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1999, pp. 43-44). Roan's exaggerated femininity through wigs, makeup, and stage costumes illustrates this performance, aligning with drag culture's tradition of representing gender as constructed rather than natural. While her performances embrace exaggeration and theatricality, they also invite reflection on gender itself, encouraging audiences to question societal norms and consider alternative modes of self-expression. By incorporating camp aestheticism, Roan creates a space for complex identities and celebrates the fluidity of queerness, thereby contributing to the evolution of pop culture.

With this framework of queer theory, camp aestheticism, and gender performativity in mind, it becomes easier to see how Roan's music and performances put these ideas into practice. Her lyrics, stage persona, and visual choices are deliberate acts that challenge heteronormativity expectations and explore the fluidity of gender and sexuality. Examining songs like "Pink Pony Club" and "Good Luck, Babe!" shows how she turns these concepts into stories about longing,

resistance, and self-expression, creating spaces for queer empowerment while also questioning societal norms.

Analysis of Chappell Roan's Lyrics and Themes

Chappell Roan's "Pink Pony Club" stands as a powerful anthem for queer liberation and self-expression, highlighting themes of community, independence, and self-exploration. The song contrasts the restrictive atmosphere of the Midwest with California, a place that represents liberation and acceptance for queer individuals. Lyrics like "I'm having wicked dreams of leaving Tennessee / Hear Santa Monica, I swear it's calling me" (Roan, 2023) capture the longing to discover a space where queerness can flourish without fear of judgment. Roan's music highlights the power of pop as a vehicle to escape the limitations of mainstream society (Björck, 2011, p. 19). These lyrics function as both a personal escape fantasy and a camp-inspired critique of heteronormative small-town values, showing how pop music can offer a vision of queer futurity.

Roan's lyrics embody the idea of queerness as a futuristic ideal. Muñoz (2009) states, "Queerness is not yet here… it is an ideal, an aspiration, a dream of a future that is not yet fully realized" (p. 1). In "Pink Pony Club," Roan envisions breaking free from a culturally restrictive setting to find a place where her queer identity can thrive. This desire for liberation reflects Muñoz's belief that queerness is not entirely realized in the present but serves as an aspirational vision for the future. Roan's depiction of this journey resonates with the hope for a world where queer identities are celebrated without limitations, offering a critique of the current state while envisioning a more inclusive tomorrow.

Additionally, "Pink Pony Club" critiques capitalist frameworks within the music industry. Roan's lyrics imply that queer spaces, like the Pink Pony Club, provide a form of resistance against the commercialization and classification of identity as well as an opportunity for genuine self-expression. She expressed her dedication to bringing joy and authenticity to her audience when she asserted that, "The only thing I want to offer as a human is to make a space where there is joy, where there wasn't before" (Capital Buzz, 2024, 33:30). This aligns with her overarching message of challenging societal restrictions.

Chappell Roan's "Good Luck, Babe!" is a striking anthem that critiques compulsory heterosexuality, radically addressing the societal pressures that uphold heterosexual norms. The song's upbeat melody starkly contrasts its emotional lyrics. It tells a story of heartbreak and defiance as Roan reflects on the emotional turmoil of watching someone she loves settle for a relationship that suppresses their true desires (Capital, 2024). The chorus, "You can kiss a hundred boys in bars / Shoot another shot, try to stop the feeling" (Roan, 2024), captures the internal struggle many LGBTQ+ individuals experience when faced with heteronormative expectations, urging listeners to acknowledge that desire cannot simply be ignored or erased. Roan's critique of compulsory heterosexuality is evident as she implies that no amount of conforming to societal norms can truly silence one's genuine desires. This directly reflects Adrienne Rich's (2006) idea of 'compulsory heterosexuality,' which positions lesbian existence as erased within a patriarchal society. Through depicting queer love as natural and unavoidable, Roan actively resists the erasure of lesbian existence within a patriarchal society.

The line "When you wake up next to him in the middle of the night / With your head in your hands, you're nothing more than his wife" (Roan, 2024) highlights the constraints imposed on women by traditional gender roles and heteronormativity. The imagery of waking up beside a man and confronting the burden of a socially assigned role serves as powerful commentary on the repression many feel within a heteronormative, patriarchal society (Seidman, 2009, p. 22). Roan's emotional delivery in this bridge, where she laments the painful realization of her partner's self-denial, acts as a moment of rebellion against the societal framework that insists on hegemonic heterosexuality. Roan's lyrics convey a critique of how heteronormative culture obscures the freedom to explore and express diverse sexualities (Seidman, 2009, p. 18). It also outlines how compulsory heterosexuality perpetuates male dominance by imposing restrictive norms on women's relationships and identities (Massey et al., 2021, p. 182).

Roan's critique of compulsory heterosexuality delves into the emotional burden of living a life that contradicts one's true self. The line "I just wanna love someone who calls me 'baby'" (Roan, 2024) captures the deep desire for a genuine relationship in which Roan can be loved freely without shame or fear; she remains determined not to settle for relationships dictated by societal expectations. This sentiment explores how women's relationships with one another are frequently dismissed or forced into secrecy (Rich, 2006, p. 210), directly challenging the social

structures that restrict women's autonomy and choices in love. By confronting these societal limitations through her candid and relatable lyrics, Roan fosters a space for empowerment and resistance, where individuality and queer love prevail over conventional standards. "Good Luck, Babe!" is a personal narrative and a cultural commentary, delivering a powerful message to those who might suppress their true selves in the name of conformity: good luck, babe!

Roan's Use of Camp Aesthetics and Drag Culture

Building on the themes of resistance to societal pressures and embracing authentic queer expression in her music, Chappell Roan brings these ideas to life on stage through camp aestheticism and drag culture. Her performances create a vibrant platform for exaggerated femininity and queerness to thrive, challenging heteronormative societal norms and expectations. Camp aestheticism, characterized by exaggeration, irony, and theatricality, is fundamental to Roan's aesthetic choices, enabling her to resist mainstream conventions. Her performances often combine elements of horror, burlesque, and theatre (Santino, 2024), creating a realm where beauty and grotesqueness coexist. In a 2024 interview with Jimmy Fallon, she expresses her passion for "looking pretty and scary" or "pretty and tacky" (Santino, 2024). Roan's work reflects a broad interpretation of femininity. Her playful approach blends beauty with the unsettling, celebrating the fluidity of gender and its performative nature, which is a key aspect of drag culture. In doing so, she encourages her audience to challenge conventional gender norms and recognize that femininity, like all gender expressions, is shaped by societal expectations and performance rituals. Her performances create a space for queer resistance, highlighting a diverse range of gender expressions and rejecting rigid, conventional portrayals of femininity.

Figure 1. Chappell Roan and her band performing at Hinterland Music Festival in coordinated nun costumes.

One of Roan's most talked-about and significant moments occurred at the Hinterland Music Festival, where she wore a nun costume that ignited discussions about queerness and religious imagery (Figure 1). Some viewed the costume as a

way of sexualizing religious figures, interpreting it as a bold political statement. However, in an interview, Roan downplayed any deeper meaning to her costumes, stating, "I just think it's just not serious… I love that fans find such deep meanings to things, and I'm just like, 'I don't know, I thought I looked hot.' Like, I don't know if it's anything more than that" (Santino, 2024, para. 5). This statement highlights Roan's irreverent approach to religious symbolism, opting instead to use it as a means of expressing queerness and rebellion. This nerve reflects camp aestheticism's ability to destabilize the 'serious', utilizing parody to challenge sacred societal symbols. Her embrace of drag culture in this context aligns with her support for drag performers, as she mentioned to People in 2023: "It's just a great way to engage the local queer community... I encourage people to tip the queens" (Kaplan, 2023, para. 20). By featuring local drag queens in her shows, Roan fosters a space for queer visibility and actively promotes the redistribution of resources within the community. Her dedication to drag culture, while respecting its roots, showcases a genuine appreciation for the artistry and politics inherent in drag performance.

Figure 2. Chappell Roan performing at Coachella in a butterfly wing costume.

The visual rhetoric of camp aestheticism is especially important in Roan's work. Her butterfly wing costume at Coachella amplified femininity to near-absurdity, transforming glamour into parody (Figure 2). Viewed through Butler's concept of gender performativity, this exaggeration reveals gender as something enacted, not natural. This approach connects Roan to pop icons like Madonna and Lady Gaga, both celebrated figures in the queer community, whose use of spectacle and gendered performance highlights the constructed nature of celebrity and identity (Cho, 2009). Roan's exaggerated displays similarly blur the lines between persona, image, and identity, following in the tradition established by these icons. Like her predecessors, Roan uses camp aestheticism to cultivate queer spaces that invite audiences to imagine new possibilities for identity and expression.

Roan's take on drag culture and camp aesthetics fits into a larger tradition in the music industry, linking her with other queer artists like Frank Ocean and Lil Nas X. For example, Ocean's work showcases a rejection of traditional masculinity and heteronormativity in modern R&B and hip-hop (Dhaenens & De Ridder, 2015, p. 284). He mixes genres and themes that challenge mainstream narratives, using his platform to address socio-cultural issues and explore queerness. Similarly, in his song "Old Town Road," Lil Nas X redefined the boundaries of country music, a genre often seen as conservative and predominantly white, by fully embracing his identity as a Black, openly gay artist (Hansen, 2021, p. 67). His bold exploration of queer identity, especially in his song "Montero," challenges Judeo-Christian values and gender norms, presenting a vision of Afrofuturism that is both personal and politically significant (Talbot & Taylor, 2023, p. 48). Like Roan, Ocean and Lil Nas X leverage their art to challenge societal and industry constraints, creating a space where queerness can be expressed freely and unapologetically. Roan's camp aesthetics and engagement with drag culture play a vital role in this ongoing movement, prompting a reassessment of gender, identity, and expression in popular culture. At the same time, who she is and where she comes from shape how she presents queerness, adding another layer to her music and performances.

Whiteness and Midwest Identity

Chappell Roan's identity as a white, Midwestern artist significantly shapes her portrayal of queerness, offering a unique perspective that intertwines her regional roots with her experiences as a queer individual. The 'Midwest Princess' idea is central to Roan's image, providing a framework to navigate her queerness while reclaiming stereotypes linked to femininity and small-town life. Small-town America is often associated with conservative values, strict gender roles, and the idea of the nuclear family as the foundation of society. By embracing and challenging the 'Midwest Princess' identity, Roan critiques the restrictive nature and contradictions of 'traditional American values.' Her over-the-top, campy performances emphasize the clash between the idealized vision of wholesome small-town life and the reality of its social limitations, allowing space for queerness and individuality to thrive.

Roan's whiteness also shapes her engagement with queer themes, especially when compared to queer artists of colour. In the context of queer identity, whiteness can provide a certain level of privilege, particularly within a predominantly white music industry. As Lee

(2020) points out, white privilege often protects white LGBTQ+ individuals from the social oppression faced by queers of colour, granting them a degree of freedom to express non-normative gender and sexuality in ways that may be less accessible to those who also navigate racial oppression and a racialized existence (p. 151). For artists like Lil Nas X and Frank Ocean, navigating the intersection of race and queerness is a more complex journey. While Chappell Roan's portrayal of 'authentic' queerness is widely celebrated, Black male artists often struggle to garner similar recognition. Racism influences which queer narratives are deemed 'valid,' with white queerness frequently positioned as the norm. Lil Nas X experienced backlash for his openly queer expressions in "Montero," while Frank Ocean's queer identity has sparked mixed reactions, highlighting how authenticity in queerness is often viewed through a racial lens in mainstream culture.

Roan's identity as a white, Midwest artist only shapes how she presents queerness on stage and in her music but also influences the ways she connects with her audience. Her background and experiences inform her perspective, providing a platform for her to engage with fans in ways that are more authentic and intentional. This foundation of identity and self-expression sets the stage for understanding how Roan impacts queer pop culture and fosters a dedicated, supportive fan community.

Roan's Impact on Queer Pop Culture and Fan Engagement

Chappell Roan has become a significant figure in queer pop culture, primarily due to her talent for cultivating a strong, supportive community for her LGBTQ+ fans. Through her music and personal engagement, Roan promotes self-expression and solidarity, creating an environment where fans feel acknowledged and accepted. Roan's authenticity and openness have positioned her as a role model for many in the LGBTQ+ community, giving a voice to those who might otherwise feel unheard.

Roan's impact goes beyond her music; she has become a beacon of empowerment and self-determination. A pivotal moment in this journey occurred when Roan addressed the issues of fan entitlement and harassment in a couple of candid TikTok videos, directly engaging with her millions of followers. She established clear boundaries, stating, "I don't care that abuse and harassment, stalking, whatever, is a normal thing to do to people who are famous or a little famous... I don't give a f–k if you think it's selfish of me to say no for a photo, or for your time,

or a hug" (Daw, 2024, para. 2). This honest, unfiltered response struck a chord with many of her followers, who voiced their support for her right to privacy and safety. However, a vocal minority criticized her for not adhering to the expectations of celebrities, claiming that being a pop star necessitates sacrificing personal space and privacy (Daw, 2024).

This controversy highlights the intricate relationship between artists and their fans, often described as parasocial attachment. This phenomenon arises when a fan forms a one-sided emotional bond with a media figure, sometimes leading to unrealistic expectations and behaviours (Hayman, 2024). For femme celebrities like Chappell Roan, these dynamics are further complicated by societal expectations rooted in heteropatriarchal norms, which often portray women as always nurturing and emotionally available. Roan actively pushes back against this idea by establishing clear boundaries with her fans and challenging the notion that she must always be available to meet their emotional needs.

Conclusion

Chappell Roan challenges traditional norms in pop music by fully embracing her queer identity, pushing back against societal expectations, and fostering inclusive environments for marginalized communities. Through her vibrant performances, striking aesthetics, and unapologetically queer lyrics, Roan empowers LGBTQ+ audiences. Tracks like "Pink Pony Club" and "Good Luck, Babe!" critique societal standards and ignite discussions about queer identity within mainstream culture, demonstrating that pop music can serve as a space for both entertainment and cultural intervention.

Roan's impact extends beyond music, providing visibility to queer individuals where they have often been overlooked. Her ascent to fame as a pop artist is especially significant at a time with such anti-LBGTQ+ and anti-trans sentiments. Roan demonstrates that queer identities can exist in mainstream cultural spaces and generate both resistance and representation by displaying a very visible, unapologetic queerness. Her work serves as an example of how pop music can serve as a platform for social commentary. In addition to providing entertainment, it defies heteronormative norms and promotes community among marginalized audiences.

Additionally, Roan demonstrates that queerness is a public, performative practice with cultural and political significance in addition to being a private identity through her use of camp

aestheticism, drag aesthetics, and performative gender challenges. She encourages audiences to challenge constructive norms, affirms a range of gender expressions, and fosters queer community solidarity. By providing visibility, affirmation, and inspiration during a time when such representation is both vital and politically charged, her music continues to influence queer pop culture. Building on the foundation Roan is laying, future studies could examine how camp aestheticism and drag culture transform perceptions of gender and sexuality in mainstream pop. As Roan sings in "Pink Pony Club," "I'm gonna keep on dancing at the Pink Pony Club," a declaration that captures the joy, defiance, and unapologetic visibility at the heart of her art.

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The Rise of a Maple Syrup Auteur: From Found Footage to the Founder of Blackberry

Ali Zakreski

Abstract

Forging a national identity for Canadian cinema is challenged by the enduring stereotype that it lacks one altogether. America's overbearing cultural influences make it a struggle for a distinct Canadian cinematic voice to emerge. Early Canadian cinema responded to this hegemony with a realism and documentary motif – an approach championed by John Grierson during his tenure with the National Film Board. He aimed to steer away from Hollywood's narrative-driven commercial style. Canadian cinema is consequently defined in relation to its American counterpart – either mimicking it, often awkwardly, or rejecting it outright. Toronto-born actor and filmmaker Matt Johnson deftly straddles the divide, blending Canada's documentary tradition with American popular culture while injecting his signature style and irreverent humour. His mockumentary approach to lampooning American media tropes produces a product with an unmistakably Canadian flavour. This paper proposes Johnson's filmography as a synecdoche of Canadian cinema, bridging its historical foundations and emerging identity. His three feature films – The Dirties (2013), Operation Avalanche (2016) and Blackberry (2023) – along with his sitcom Nirvanna the Band the Show (2017-2018), will be viewed through the dual lens of Canada's cinematic past and charting a future distinct identity.

Introduction

Matt Johnson: A Canadian Filmmaker

Toronto-born actor, writer, and filmmaker Matt Johnson has directed four feature films and two television shows. Academic scholarship on Johnson's filmography is lacking, perhaps because his films are seen as too 'silly' to be taken seriously or too recent to have generated any scholarship. I aim to make the case that Johnson's films are deeply rooted in conversation with Canadian cinematic tradition while also forging a new path for its future. Johnson is arguably the most original Canadian filmmaker since David Cronenberg, changing the comedy landscape as much as Cronenberg altered the language of horror.

The cinematic identities of Canada and America are too vast and complex for one essay to tackle. The notion of confining the United States' "extensive commercial enterprise" (Bordwell, 1985, p. 1) and the entirety of Canada's early cinematic history into a single paragraph is both absurd and impossible. This paper will instead provide a brief outline of Hollywood and Canada's National Film Board's (NFB) studio systems, as well as identify their key differences.

One cannot speak of Classical Hollywood without acknowledging its vast studio system. The 'big five' studios dominating Hollywood's golden era were Warner Bros, 20th Century Studios, Universal, Columbia, and Paramount Pictures. Those studios played the equivalent role of Canada's NFB, establishing an American cultural identity through cinema. The American cinematic national identity was communicated through a specific Classical Hollywood style, which "conceals its artifice through techniques of continuity and invisible storytelling" (Bordwell, 1985, p. 1). Hollywood filmmaking has long strived toward the ideal of "pure entertainment" (Dyer, 1981, p. 19). While maintaining the illusion that what is on screen is not a constructed reality. Hollywood filmmaking was about creating a utopia focused more on what it "would feel like rather than how it would be organized" (Dyer, 1981, p. 20).

Canadian cinema, by contrast, was decidedly less glamorous, rooted as it was in documentary filmmaking. Canada could not compete with America's scale of film production; therefore, it had to offer something different. John Grierson, the former head of the Canadian National Film Board, which he founded in 1939 (Druick, 2007, p. 15), had a major influence on Canada's cinematic identity. The NFB was the defining voice of Canadian cinema, in contrast to the 'big five' studios of Hollywood. NFB documentary films embraced realism by using real places and people. The utopia presented in these early Canadian films was more grounded in community and realistic goals compared to the individualism typifying Classical Hollywood's cinema. The goal of early Canadian cinema was not to create Hollywood fantasies, but "to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations" (Leach, 2010, p. 17). If Hollywood was the *dream* factory, then Canada was the *reality* factory.

Johnson is primarily a mockumentary filmmaker, a genre that "plays with documentary conventions" (Wallace, 2018, p. 5), often lampooning them. The mockumentary shares the aesthetic qualities of a documentary, but its subjects are fictional. It pairs the seriousness of a documentary with lighthearted situations. The juxtaposition between the serious and formal style of a documentary with Johnson's often frivolous content makes the mockumentary the perfect genre for his comedy. Johonson speaks to Canada's realist past but with a comedic twist – using the seriousness of the documentary format for his own humorous purposes. Johnson transformed the NFB's mission from showing the world a realistic image of Canada to presenting it through a comedic lens. He embraced both 'pure entertainment' and crowd-pleasing tendencies of Classical Hollywood filmmaking, with the realism and documentary style of early Canadian cinema.

Despite the efforts of Canadian film institutions to establish a unique national identity for their cinema, the proximity to the United States has made this nearly impossible. Canadian cinema is usually stereotyped as a cheap American knockoff. Johnson leans into this perception, with American popular culture permeating every frame of his filmography. There is hardly a

single frame of his films that does not feature a Hollywood movie poster somewhere in the background. The uniqueness of Johnson's style comes from fusing Canadian documentary with Hollywood aesthetics – creating a new type of Canadian cinema. Johnson is not simply just a Canadian filmmaker: he is a maple syrup auteur, forging a new path for himself and Canadian cinema.

Matt Johnson and Telefilm

Canadian cinema is primarily sustained through public funding, notably from agencies such as Telefilm Canada. Matt Johnson expresses ambivalence toward this system. On one hand, he acknowledges the cultural value of a nation that financially supports its artists. His films have benefited from such funding. Johnson also praises Telefilm for "making feature films and every single television show" (Johnson, 2018, TIFF, 5.03), acknowledging that his work would not exist without them. On the other hand, he critiques what he sees as institutional "risk aversion" (Johnson, 2018, 4:00) that typifies Canada's film-funding bodies.

This conservative approach of public funding inhibits the creation of daring, innovative cinema – exactly the kind of work that could foster a robust Canadian cinematic identity. The problem of underfunding bold and original art is an issue shared with the American film industry. The United States suffers from "blockbuster mentality, which in turn sets financial expectations so unreasonably high that jittery studios refused to fund more experimental and iconoclastic moviemakers" (Friedman, 2007, p. 5). Canadian and American cinema are thus both held back by risk aversion. Patrons of Canadian media funds often lack incentives to support bold or original work, noting, "people are getting paid whether their show is good or not" and "you don't need to push the boundaries to get work because the work is already funded" (Johnson, 2018, 5:21). American cinema faces similar constraints for opposite reasons: there is greater emphasis on earning a return on investments, rather than on creating culturally defining art. Johnson proposed a solution that would work for both Canada and the United States: take more risks on

imperfect and unproven filmmakers. Canada must "promote failure" as a necessary step in "training our young filmmakers" (Johnson, 2016, 25:15). Only if we embolden our young and innovative filmmakers to tell unique and personal stories is the only way to create a new and bold cinematic identity for Canada. Without this willingness to support creative risk-taking, the industry will likely remain stagnant, thereby curtailing the potential evolution of a national identity.

Johnson's filmography is marked by boundary-pushing storytelling and a refusal to compromise artistic vision. It demonstrates to emerging Canadian filmmakers that it is possible to tell their stories authentically – even within the constraints of a risk-averse funding landscape.

The Dirties (2013)

Part One: A Canuck Cinderella Story

If a Canadian film premieres at a film festival and an American does not see it, does it still exist? Luckily for Matt Johnson, American filmmaker Kevin Smith discovered Johnson's debut film, *The Dirties*, which premiered at Slamdance, a Los Angeles film festival for emerging and independent filmmakers. The film received high praise and was awarded the Grand Jury prize, which Smith later joked that the film festival was taken over by "true hostile Canadians" (Smith, 2013, 0:31). Smith was introduced to *The Dirties* by his friend and producer, Elyse Seiden, and was "moved immensely" (Smith, 2013, 0:54). He would later say it was "the most important film of the year" (Smith, 2013, para. 3). Smith then used his international fame to promote a low-budget Canadian film.

The Dirties benefited from "the international film apparatus" and how it "[bestows] cultural capital in generating a niche market for art cinema" (Longfellow, 2009, p. 171). Canadian cinema relies on the American film festival to gain global publicity. As much as Canadian cinema wants to distance itself from Hollywood's oppressive domination over culture,

it's impossible. The Canadian film industry remains too small to stand out on the world stage without an American audience to bolster it – ears for our falling maple trees.

Part Two: Realism, Mocumentary, and Governmentality

The Dirties reflects Canada's "fundamentally realist" (Leach, 2010, p. 17) style of filmmaking. The found-footage style mockumentary follows two bullied high schoolers, Matt Johnson and Owen Williams, as their plan for a fictional depiction of a school shooting for a student film turns into planning a real one. The timing of this film's release at Slamdance reflects the prevalence of school violence in America, as the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary happened just two weeks before its premiere. Real-life violence was a key inspiration for Johnson as "a lot of inspiration for this film came from our memories of what we saw as a kid when Columbine happened and understanding what was going on" (Johnson, 2013, para. 6).

The mockumentary style utilized was not just to reflect real-life violence; it is also done for practical reasons. *The Dirties*, like many Canadian debuts, was made on a shoestring budget. The film only cost $10,000 to make, with $9,000 used for music rights (Johnson, 2016, 14:48). Johnson utilized the film's structure to make its low budget work for the story. Presenting the film as a found footage documentary made by teenage amateurs provided cover for mistakes caused by limited funds and experience. The mistakes established narrative realism for the film, as it was ostensibly created by two confused and angry teenage boys.

Dirties takes "realism [in a] more radical direction" (Druick, 2007, p. 16) by not using the style to promote governmentality. Foucault defines governmentality as "the range of practices organized around conducting the conduct of self in society" (Druick, 2007, p. 23). It is further defined as "how to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed" (Foucault, 1978, p. 87) Film scholar Zoe Druick's book *Projecting Canada* (2007) tracks Canada's early film history and connects it with Foucault's concept of governmentality. Druick's chapter on "NFB and Government," explores how

Canada's tradition of documentary filmmaking defined its cinematic national identity—early Canadian cinema documentaries aimed to educate Canadian citizens on pro-social values and therefore promote societal norms. Films were used to promote "narratives of ideal citizenship" (Druick, 2007, p. 23) and pro-Canadian values. Examples can be found in Norman McLaren's work for the NFB, which encourages Canadians to to conform to the acceptable social values of the time such as buying War Bonds during the Second World War – e.g., *Hen Hop* (1942) and not starting unnecessary conflict with one's neighbour (*Neighbours*, 1952) These films promoted positive interactions between both Canadian government institutions and citizens.

Johnson uses the aesthetics of early NFB films, but his films show zero interest in preaching governmentality like McLaren. The legacy of John Grierson and the NFB cannot be escaped, only subverted, as even the tools of governmentality can be used to criticize it. *The Dirties* protagonists are outsiders; they do not fit into generally accepted societal norms and are punished for it. Matt Johnson (the character) solves this issue by bringing a gun to school to shoot "only the bad guys" (Johnson, 2013), a solution that is neither legal nor pro-social. *The Dirties* criticize "our government agents [and] services" (Druick, 2007, p. 23) as being ineffective. This character convinces the Toronto building management to provide him with the building plans for his high school. The footage is fuzzy and shot at a tilted angle to blur reality with a fictional narrative. The lie that he needs the plans for a school project is not questioned by the staff. Even the immature Johnson showed concern over this lack of oversight and how a valid student ID was not required to obtain a detailed map of a high school.

Operation Avalanche (2016): How two Canadians infiltrated NASA.

Operation Avalanche is Johnson's follow-up to *The Dirties*. It utilizes the same mockumentary style of filmmaking for different reasons. The film follows two young filmmakers working for the CIA in the 1960s who are tasked with faking the moon landing to win the space race against Russia. It is "a fake documentary about the CIA faking the moon

landing" (Johnson, 2016, 0:51), offering a speculative take on real-life events. *Operation Avalanche* balances "the tensions between documentary evidence, fictional re-enactment," which "acknowledge[s] the difficulties involved in creating convincing images of reality" (Leach, 2010, p. 31). Matt Johnson and Owen Williams, just like in *The Dirties,* play characters who share their real names – a key component in how they got the film made. Johnson and Williams (actors) used the cover of being graduate students at the University of Toronto to gain access to NASA. They lied, saying they were making a student film to earn their Master's degrees. The astronauts interviewed for the movie are not actors; they are "real people who really did these things talking about it with passion, how do you get an actor to do that" (Johnson, 2016, 11:27).

  Operation Avalanche was made to look like it was shot on 16mm film, giving the impression that it was archival footage. However, it was shot digitally due to the film's limited $1 million budget, which, like *The Dirties*, was largely spent on licensing music (Johnson, 2016, 15:04). Cinematographer Jared Raab explained that "if you want to make something look like it's on film, you can shoot digital and then do a one-to-one transfer" and he "did the film transfers shot by shot" (Film Supply, para. 7). To achieve a more authentic look, Raab also stated: "We'd often match whole sequences to the stock footage" (Film Supply, para. 9). The attention to detail is immaculate; when the characters get new cameras, the visual quality improves, witnessing their world through their camera lens.

  Johnson is a fearless filmmaker, never letting any setback compromise his creative vision. There is a scene featuring Stanley Kubrick on the set of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), as you cannot have a moon landing conspiracy theory without Kubrick. Johnson reached out to Kubrick's estate to recreate his image, and they declined, so he "reacreat[ed] Kubrick illegally from photographs that Time magazine took" (Johnson, 2016, 7:46). The voice was re-created using sound from a documentary made by Kubrick's daughter. The experience paints Johnson as a scrappy filmmaker who can make movie magic with a minuscule budget and powerful people set against him.

Nirvanna the Band the Show (2017-2018)

Part One: The Merging of Canadian Identity with American Hegemony

Nirvanna the Band the Show follows the antics of Matt Johnson and Jay McCarroll as they attempt to get their band a gig at the Rivoli, an iconic music venue in Toronto. Using Rivoli, a real Toronto-based music venue, successfully situates the show within Toronto, making it distinctly and unmistakably Canadian. Instead of recording music or calling to book a show, they do ever-increasing hair-brained schemes to get the Rivoli's attention. In the episode "The Boy" (Season One, Episode 6, 2017), they kidnap a sick child from the hospital with the hopes of leveraging their 'Make a Wish' to get them their coveted spot at the Rivoli. Toronto is the show's third protagonist, featuring several references to local businesses such as Honest Ed's. The show's main plot point revolves around getting a gig at a venue that's Toronto-based. It stands out from other Canadian media, where the "locations [are] disguised and dressed to look like somewhere else or nowhere at all" (Acland, 2013, p. 277). The decision received some pushback as, according to Johnson, fellow Canadian filmmaker Kenny Hotz stated that he "made a big mistake setting this in Toronto" (Johnson, 2024, 0:7). Because a distinctly Canadian setting might alienate viewers, the safest strategy is often to depict Toronto as a generic American city. Johnson rejects the disavowal of Canada in Canadian media because he "love[s] Toronto and Canada so much, that [he does not] try to hide it" (Johnson, 2024, 0:27).

Nirvanna the Band the Show wears its American influences on its sleeve. Retaining its distant Canadian and Toronto identity while revelling in its love for American popular culture. This stylistic choice reflects the psyche of the two protagonists, who are "perpetually stuck in the nineties" (Johnson, 2018, 0:50). *The Boast* (Johnson, 2017) revolves around the video game GoldenEye 007 (1997), showing America's influence on Canadian childhood nostalgia. American culture is hegemonic and Canadian media is negatively stereotyped as unable to sever itself from America's influence. That is why early Canadian cinema leaned into realism and

documentary style, wanting to distance itself from Hollywood's influence. *Nirvanna the Band the Show* utilizes a hybrid of both Canadian realist tradition and American popular culture.

The Big Time (Johnson, 2017) effectively mixes "guerrilla-style of mockumentary filmmaking" (Johnson, 2017, 0:31) with parody. This episode lampoons the American HBO series *Entourage* (2004-2011). The opening credits are a shot-for-shot recreation, using the same theme music and imagery. The episode follows yet another scheme to play the Rivoli, thinking that sneaking a film into the Sundance Film Festival will get them discovered – serving as a parody of how Canadian filmmakers are often 'discovered' at American film festivals. The scenes shot at Sundance were real, coinciding with the premiere of Johnson's sophomore film *Operation Avalanche*. The name of the movie that the fictional characters sneak into the festival shares the name of Johnson's real movie, blurring the line between reality and fiction. Johnson cheekily addresses the camera, saying, "That's the title, I'm not sure how much you guys know," (Johnson, 2017, *Nirvanna The Band the Show*, 2:53), breaking both character and the fourth wall. The fictional movie within a television show is a meta-commentary on Johnson's debut feature, *The Dirties*.

All the scenes shot at Sundance were real, including the interviews. Johnson took advantage of doing press for his real movie to make content for his television show. He even introduced the film in character and used it as the climax of the episode, finding joy that "the super old and Mormon crowd bought it" (Johnson, 2017, 5:13). The audience reacts with genuine bafflement as Jay McCarrol introduces a Matt Johnson film as something he made, not knowing they are part of a fictional narrative. Kevin Smith is the only person at the festival who was in on the joke – a nod to the publicity he gave to Johnson's debut film.

Part Two: Canadian Outlaws, or, How to Not Get Sued

Every episode of the show is a parody of American popular culture, lampooning everything from the obscure Wahlberger's reality television show to popular franchise films such

as *Indiana Jones*. The episode *The Band List* (Johnson, 2018) uses "wall-to-wall John Williams music without informing the copyright holder and without paying anything" (Johnson, 2018,2:19). Fair use laws are vaguely written, as filmmakers are allowed to use licensed material if they prove they have a "strong narrative reason" (Johnson, 2018, 1:21) for it. *Nirvanna the Band the Show* accomplishes *"*normaliz[ing] fair use practices in media" (Johnson, 2017, 8:46), which Johnson hopes will encourage more filmmakers to use licensed material for original storytelling purposes.

Johnson is a rebellious filmmaker who lives by the credence of Canadian filmmaker Bruce McDonald, "realize[ing] and revel[ing] in the fact that there are no rules" (McDonald, 1988, p. 3). Johnson did not have permission for most of what was filmed for *Nirvanna the Band the Show*; during the course of the show, he jumped on Toronto's underground train tracks, got kicked out of Canada's Wonderland, and purchased speed. Johnson is willing to take these risks because "once you have the footage, its your" (Johnson, 2016, 13:20) These are all things that are illegal but that lends to Johnson's unique voice in doing what others haven't taking his work "to the edge of chaos because that's where the crazy stuff is going to happen" (Johnson,2018, 9:31) Johnson is truly the outlaw filmmaker that McDonald valorized in the 80s – except Johnson actually breaks the law.

Blackberry (2023): Interpreting Canada to Canadians and The World

Johnson's filmography culminates in *Blackberry*, a dramatization of the creation of the world's first smartphone. The drama comes from the clashing personalities of the engineers, Doug Fregin (played by Matt Johnson), and Mike Lazaridis (played by Jay Baruchel), with their eccentric investor, Jim Balsillie (played by Glenn Howerton). Johnson retains his signature mockumentary style, even when crafting a tightly scripted drama. This is the first work of Johnson's where he does not incorporate real footage, nor is he playing himself. This does not mean that the style he had been developing throughout his career is not present. Johnson may not

be playing himself, but he is still playing "a very funny nerd character who's constantly quoting movies" (Johnson, 2023, 12:12).

The BlackBerry phone is one of the most important Canadian inventions – changing the lives of nearly every person in the world. It is an educational film about Canada's contribution to the tech world because "ninety-nine percent of international people who talk to me about this film say the same thing: I didn't know Blackberry was Canadian" (Johnson, 2023, para. 2). The film also reflects our relation to America as an all-encompassing force. The line stating, "You have the best engineers in Canada" (Johnson, 2023, 56:46*)* is a snide comment on Canada's perceived limited talent pool. The constant threat of a hostile takeover by American corporate interests hangs over the movie, presenting America as the schoolyard bully.

An American investor character expresses a dislike for hockey, and for the sake of a business deal, a Canadian must pretend to hate it as well. This demonstrates how Canadians must often truncate their core identity to appease American audiences. Johnson made no compromises for this film, never hiding its Canadianness to make it palatable for an international audience. Johnson takes umbrage with the fact that Canada does not get any international recognition for its achievements: "It's almost like it didn't happen on the world stage. Our country doesn't get the credit for the fact that we invented the smartphone" (Johnson, 2023, para. 3). In making a film that manages to be "both entertaining and unabashedly Canadian" (Johnson, 2023, 12:34), Johnson continues adhering to the NFB mandate "to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations" (Leach, 2010, p. 17).

Conclusion: The Future of Canadian Cinema

Analyzing Johnson's filmography paints a portrait not only of the artist but also of the nation that shaped him. Canadian history and aesthetics are seamlessly blended with a unique personal style. Johnson's distinct filmmaking style combats the notion that "English Canadian cinema has *zero* international identity*"* (Johnson, 2023, para. 10).

In finding humour in realism and uniqueness in parody, Johnson, in my opinion, takes what is stale and trite about Canadian cinema and makes it shine with originality. He shows Canadian cinema as having radical power because, with "the limitation of having no money and no power, you can actually do more interesting stuff" (Johnson, 2016, 6:24). Johnson represents a new destiny for Canadian national cinema and its filmmakers. A future where filmmakers can be inspired by Canada's history and American culture without being shackled by either.

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