

# DISRUPT SOMETHING

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UNIVERSITY OF  
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Canada's  
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DISRUPT  
SOMETHING



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Department of Communication,  
Media and Film

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## LETTER FROM FOUNDING EDITOR, MELISSA MORRIS

The Motley is a community of scholars, readers, editors, reviewers, and storytellers bound by a shared love of learning and creation. As a journal based in Moh'kinstis (Calgary), we acknowledge the traditional Treaty 7 territory of the Siksika, Kainai, and Piikani Nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy; the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations (Bears paw, Chiniki, and Goodstoney First Nations); and the Tsuut'ina Nation. This region is also home to the Otipemisiwak, the Métis Nation within Alberta (Nose Hill Métis District 5 and Elbow Métis District 6) within the historic Northwest Métis homeland. We express our deep gratitude to the Indigenous communities who have cared for this land and whose communication practices continue to guide our understanding of reciprocity, relationship, and respect. We recognize that traditional academia has long privileged colonial ways of thinking and conducting research. This bias has contributed to the marginalization of Indigenous voices and epistemologies. In our work, we aim to challenge these hierarchies by embracing multiple ways of knowing. By supporting Indigenous scholarship and amplifying Indigenous-led initiatives, we commit to fostering dialogue that moves us toward genuine reconciliation and restitution.

The legacies of colonialism extend far beyond Canada. They are woven into the global struggles of peoples resisting occupation, exploitation, and erasure. In that spirit, The Motley Journal stands in solidarity with those resisting systemic violence worldwide.

**We call for an immediate ceasefire in Palestine and for an end to the genocides and humanitarian crises unfolding in Sudan, Congo, and Tigray.** The right to self-determination and sovereignty is universal, and our commitment to truth, justice, and reconciliation demands that we speak up whenever these rights are denied.

This Special Issue belongs to the student authors who dared to put their ideas into the world. Understanding the intersection of social movements and media demands rigorous, engaged scholarship. Who better to lead this inquiry than students—the generation who came of age alongside these movements, and who often stand on the front lines of change themselves?

Throughout the last two years, we witnessed students being brutalized across the country for sit-ins, encampments, and occupations, which called for the end to the genocide of the Palestinian people by the Israeli government. We saw professors silenced, news broadcasters fired, and research wiped from public databases. We have a duty to push back against these injustices.



For this issue, we encouraged undergraduate and graduate students from across Canada's post-secondary institutions to contribute their voices, analyses, and stories. Your insights are vital to understanding and shaping our collective future. At a time where student voices have been silenced across campuses in North America, including acts of police violence against peaceful protestors at our own institution, it is The Motley's job to continue to be a place for students to share their excellent, thought provoking research, and to push back against colonial frameworks, including the idea of academic institutions as arbiters of truth and justice themselves.

This publication would not exist without our faculty partners who volunteered their time to review submissions, promote the journal, and champion student research. We are especially grateful to **Dr. Maria Victoria Guglietti**, whose mentorship, insight, and tireless support have nurtured The Motley from its earliest days.

I want to express my personal thanks to **Skye Baxter** and **Sheroog Kubur**. When I founded The Motley in 2022, during my final year as an undergraduate, I met **Skye**, then only in her second year, and instantly knew her passion for student research would guide this journal into the future. I tossed her into the fray of running a journal while attending full time university and for the past two years, she has made this job look easy, leading The Motley team with capable, and visionary hands. Now she passes this role onto **Sheroog Kubur**. Thank you, **Sheroog**, for recognizing the value in the challenges, late nights, and dedication that come with serving as Managing Editor while pursuing your studies. This is no small undertaking, and I have full confidence that your insight, leadership, and creativity will guide The Motley toward an even brighter and stronger future.

To our readers: thank you. In a time when attention is a scarce resource, we are honoured that you've chosen to spend yours with us. We hope that the voices you encounter in these pages challenge, inspire, and move you to think differently about the power of media and the movements it amplifies.

We look forward to sharing more of your stories, your research, and your insights in future issues. It has been an honour to be the founder of this space for academic expression, I look forward to what the future holds for The Motley!

With gratitude and solidarity,

**Melissa Morris**

Founding Editor, The Motley Undergraduate Journal



# 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 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 MARIA BARCELO**  
**Outreach Director**

Olga Barcelo has been our Outreach Director since December of 2024.

She was inspired to be part of a team that has been able to bring a variety of voices 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 Eby (they/them) is a master's student in Sustainability Studies at Trent University and a peer reviewer with the 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.



**MAGGIE HSU**  
**Copyeditor**

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.

**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).



**ISMAYIL IMANLI**  
Peer Reviewer

Hi! My name is Ismayil Imanli. I am double-majoring in PoliSci and Soci. I am an aspiring lawyer with a deep interest in social scientific inquiry, which draws me to work with The Motley. One of my favourite areas of research, which I am writing a monograph on, is the comparative analysis of Insurgency and State Violence in different polities and times. Another motivation for me to work with the Motley would be raising academic activities outside of the lecture halls. In my free time, I am interested in learning music theory and playing piano. I am 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.



**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.



**NATASHA BODNARCHUCK**  
Peer Reviewer

Natasha Bodnarchuck (she/her) is an author, peer reviewer, and copyeditor 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 the media, she can be found mountain biking, skiing, or spending time with her friends. She looks forward to reading the other undergraduates work!

**MATAYA HOFLAND**  
Peer Reviewer, Copyeditor



# THE AUTHORS



**ANYA RUSSELL**

*Pleasure and Patriarchy: Tracing Changes in Women's Sexual and Romantic Relationships during the Sexual Liberation Movement*

Anya Russell (she/her) is a sociology and political science double major at the University of Toronto. Her contribution to *The Motley* revives the voices of women from the 1960s-70s, as expressed in magazines, who navigated sex, love, and relationships amid the moral panic of the sexual liberation movement. By spotlighting how social movements shape the most intimate parts of our lives, Anya invites readers to listen to the raw honesty of these women. Veering away from divisive arguments of “good or bad” and “right or wrong”, she hopes her study encourages readers to consider social movements and political beliefs as deeply personal, warranting nuance and empathy.



**TASBEEHA SHAZAD**

*Between Helplessness and Hostility: Analyzing CNN's Racialized Framing of Palestinians in Crisis*

Tasbeeha Shahzad (she/her) is a Communications and Media Studies major whose work explores the intersections of media, politics, and representation. In the journal, she contributed “Between Helplessness and Hostility: Analyzing CNN's Racialized Framing of Palestinians in Crisis.” Her piece was inspired by a deep interest in how journalistic practices shape public perception and how frameworks like Noam Chomsky's propaganda model and Edward Said's Orientalism remain strikingly relevant in contemporary media. Palestinian activism is a cause close to her heart, motivating a critical look at the narratives that dominate mainstream coverage. Looking ahead, Tasbeeha hopes to pursue a career that combines communication and advocacy, whether through nonprofit work, political media analysis, or health communications, with the goal of amplifying underrepresented voices and promoting media accountability.

**ANILIESE SPENCER**

***The Palestine Within: Exploring Diasporic Identity, Emotional Struggle, and Social Media's Role in Shaping Resistance and Belonging***

Aniliese Spencer (she/her) is a 3rd year Communications and Media Studies student at the University of Calgary. This past Summer, she had the opportunity to continue further research surrounding the Palestinian diaspora community with Program for Undergraduate Research Experience (PURE), where she was able to learn more about her community and the people within it. Other than being a student, she is the Vice President of Communications with the Faculty of Arts Students Association, volunteers with Pro Bono Law Alberta, and she works at the Centre for Newcomers, teaching newcomer students english as a second language. Aniliese loves the community of students at U of C and is grateful to be able to have had this opportunity to highlight the issues faced by the Palestinian diaspora community at the university and beyond.

# **Pleasure and Patriarchy**

## **Tracing Changes in Women's Sexual and Romantic Relationships during the Sexual Liberation Movement**

**Anya Russell**

### **Abstract**

The sexual liberation movement revealed that women were being controlled and subordinated within their intimate relationships. The movement exposed this mechanism of social control by attaching women's deep sexual dissatisfaction to their subordinate social and political statuses. With an influx of information during the second wave about women's health, anatomy and sexual pleasure, this study aims to address how the movement impacted women's sexual relationships and, therefore, answers this research question: "How have women's sexual displays of love changed according to the sexual liberation movement of the second wave of feminism?" Through a content analysis of twelve articles from six different magazines written during the second wave of feminism, this research paper finds two main conclusions. First, the sexual liberation movement changed older women's romantic relationships and sexual displays of love as these new social norms revolutionarily encouraged women to advocate for themselves within sexual relationships. Second, for younger women, the movement triggered profound ideological struggles and moral discomfort while normalizing premarital casual sex. Paying attention to the humanistic dynamics of a political movement, this study elucidates where women felt a positive and negative change at the height of the sexual liberation movement.

### **Keywords**

Feminism, content analysis, sexual liberation movement, social movement



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## RESEARCH STATEMENT

In the quest for gender equality, second-wave feminists unveiled another layer of gender oppression that permeated beyond the public sphere and into their private lives. Women realized they were not only being controlled politically and economically but also within their intimate relationships. Thus began the sexual liberation movement. Women's sexuality, specifically their anatomical knowledge and understanding of the act of sex, was constructed by chauvinist men whose political and social goals hinged on women's subordination and internalized inferiority. Most fascinatingly, the movement exposed this mechanism of social control by attaching women's deep sexual dissatisfaction to their subordinate social and political statuses. This made women's romantic sexual and relationships a social issue. The sense of constraint was brought to the forefront of women's consciousness when feminists realized how deep-seated patriarchal control and ideologies were as they controlled acts of intimacy within the most private of spaces.

Historically, sex was never framed as being for the woman or decided by the woman. Instead, women's sexuality and reproductive systems were controlled by husbands, doctors, and politicians. Literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century told women that healthy and proper sex depended on their passivity, innocence and dependence on their husbands (Gerhard, 2000). As such, women did not hold any power in deciding when to have sex or how they were going to have sex. By framing women's roles this way, women overwhelmingly saw sex as something they did for their husbands rather than for themselves or the health of their romantic relationship (Lieberman, 2016).

The sexual liberation movement was a response to these constraints on women's sexuality and a broader, indistinct dissatisfaction with life (Lieberman, 2016). Feminists encouraged women to take responsibility for their pleasure and learn about their bodies as entities independent of men. Despite the clear impact this movement would have on women's intimate relationships, literature on the sexual liberation movement primarily focuses its energy on explaining the link between sexual oppression and political oppression. Meanwhile, many feminists writing in the 1960s to 1970s sought to share, legitimize

and validate women's experiences after centuries of being told they were physically and/or mentally inadequate.

Women's sexuality and intimate relationships continue to be laced with undertones of masculine-centred patriarchal ideals. Most women still struggle to speak up in the bedroom, and its implications are gravely deserving of attention. Some consequences this study finds include unclear consent leading to rape allegations or feelings of being taken advantage of and lack of experiencing sexual pleasure leading to cheating, feelings of guilt and self-blame. Uncovering how social movements can provoke change within the private sphere is a compelling way of understanding social and political change. Moreover, analyzing what went right and what went wrong offers a path forward in revising and reviving the movement, as these struggles are far from over.

With an influx of information during the second wave about women's health, anatomy and sexual pleasure, this study aims to address how the movement impacted women's sexual relationships. After all, this sexual revolution prompted many women's first orgasms and divorces. Therefore, my study aims to answer this research question: How did the sexual liberation movement as reflected in women's magazines change women's sexual and romantic relationships?

To explore this question, this study first situates itself within the historical and theoretical discussions that have defined the sexual liberation movement's legacy. It then details the methodological approach, a qualitative analysis of women's own words, collected from popular magazines of the era, to understand the movement's impact on a personal level. The analysis reveals often contradictory set of experiences, which I explore through the three emergent themes of societal pressure, incongruity, and self-liberation. Ultimately, this paper argues that the reception of the sexual liberation movement was split along generational lines, a finding that complicates and enriches our understanding of the second-wave feminism's impact.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Most academic articles written about the sexual liberation movement were primarily published at the beginning of the 21st century, a few decades after the second wave of feminism reached its peak. This literature review has two primary objectives: to explore the historical context and debate its political significance. Providing historical context explains why and how sex is a politically charged issue. Debating its political significance critically evaluates the utility of centring female sexuality and sexual pleasure in the feminist movement.

### Historical Context

In discussing historical context, scholars tend to provide a historiography of this period, including the writings of famous feminists as cultural artifacts that provide valuable insights into the leading voices of the sexual liberation movement. Gerhard's (2000) study "Revisiting 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm': The Female Orgasm in American Sexual Thought and Second Wave Feminism" uses Anne Koedt's 1970 *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* as a "window into one moment of feminist sexual thought" (Gerhard, 2000, p. 450). Gerhard (2000) explains how Koedt outlined the political significance of female pleasure and sexuality by revisioning the clitoris as the center of female pleasure rather than the vagina. This was a response to Freud's 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* which explained that upon maturity, women undergo an "erotic transfer" which shifts their source of pleasure from their clitoris to their vagina (Gerhard, 2000, p. 453). Second-wave feminists spent a lot of time undoing Freud's psychoanalytic understanding of female sexuality since it placed women as inherently subordinate to men while also spreading false theories of sexuality (Freud, 2016). Essentially, sexual liberationists identified patriarchal constructions of sexuality that damaged and suppressed women physically, mentally and emotionally for decades. As such, historical context is an essential component of the literature as it explains how and why the sexual liberation movement found female sexuality politically significant.



## The Political Significance Debate

Those who examined the movement's political significance commonly debated the importance of women's sexual pleasure in obtaining gender equality. Lieberman (2016) also begins her study, "Intimate Transactions: Sex Toys and the Sexual Discourse of Second-Wave Feminism," with a detailed historiography. However, Lieberman's historical context focuses on the movement's divisive nature. The idea that women's sexual pleasure was significant in obtaining gender equality was radical, and many feminists debated this idea. Betty Friedan, famously known for *The Feminine Mystique*, said she did not think a "thousand vibrators would make much difference...if unequal power positions in real life weren't changed" (Lieberman, 2016 p. 99). In "Slave of a Slave No More: Black women in Struggle," Frances M. Beal (1981) complements Friedan's message. Beal (1981) critiques the women's liberation movement for failing to address the real, material causes of harm by instead focusing on superficial or symbolic issues. She uses a metaphor of a thief entering one's home: "you can either shoot the shadow of the thief or you can shoot the body" (Beal, 1981, p. 22). In this case, sex could be understood as a mere shadow distracting mainstream feminism from the root causes of sexism (Beal, 1981). Moreover, some feminist groups rejected the notion of reclaiming women's sexuality altogether (Lieberman, 2016). They perceived sexual desires as masculine, designed to enslave women to men as women "don't have orgasms" and argued women's sexual liberation should mean "liberation from sexuality" (Lieberman, 2016, p. 100). Arguing against these claims, other feminists viewed personal-level change as tackling the root issue—hence the catchphrase "the personal is political" (Lieberman, 2016, p. 90). They contested that "a revolution in every bedroom cannot fail to shake up the status quo" (Lieberman, 2016, p. 100). Hence, there was a heavy dialogue between feminists on the importance of women's sexual pleasure. Even within radical "pro-sex" feminists, there was disagreement on exactly how the liberated woman should have sex (Lieberman, 2016). This debate shaped much of the literature published on the sexual liberation movement, as many feminists are still attempting to argue the political significance of sex and whether it is productive for achieving gender equality. Noting this discussion is important as women's respective positions on this debate influence the manner and degree to which the movement affected their sexual relationships. My study's research will build upon this discussion as qualitatively examining changes in

women's sexual and romantic relationships may produce results that adhere to one, both or neither side of the debate. Despite this division, it is clear that women, no matter their position on the matter, were affected by the rising idea that sexual pleasure has political importance.

### **The Role of Media in the Movement**

Outside of the political and academic space where this debate was taking place, many feminist magazines promoting sexual liberation were circulating. These magazines are an important part of studying the movement's influence, as their provocativeness serves as a reflection and reaction to the sexual liberation movement. They have been crucial in studying public sentiments during this time, as these accessible magazines also served as socializing agents. Gil-Glazer's (2020) article examines the magazine *Oz*, a controversial counterculture magazine published in Britain and Australia and its relationship to the sexual liberation movement. *Oz*'s contents reflected an anti-establishment utopia where freedom of expression was celebrated. Its readers were primarily teenagers, and Gil-Glazer (2020) argues the magazine was a sex education agent that encouraged sexual expression. Similarly, Riviere et al. (2013) article analyses sexual messages within the magazines *Cosmo* and *Essence*. The article examines the extent to which depictions of sex within the magazines mirrored the principles of the second wave (Riviere et al. 2013). These studies are extremely significant to the field of research as they analyze content from the sexual liberation movement.

Continuing the debate, Gil-Glazer (2020) and Riviere et al. (2013) seek to decipher whether these magazines had positive or negative impacts on women and the women's movement. Gil-Glazer (2020) suggests *Oz* contradictorily includes sexist messages alongside its feminist ones. Meanwhile, Riviere and Byerly (2013) ponder whether these magazines were truly feminist since *Cosmo* and *Essence* often frame their sexual advice as instructions on how to keep a man interested. Thus, within these articles, the debate on whether the sexual liberation movement advances feminist agendas continues.

While Gil-Glazer (2020) and Riviere et al. (2013) examine the magazines' messages, little attention is given to the reader's discourse. Contrarily, Lieberman's (2016) study examines customer letters sent to Dell Williams, founder of Eve's Garden, the first sex shop owned and run by women.

Lieberman (2016) coded the letters to understand women's attitudes toward sex toys. This provides an important contribution to the literature as its research design provides insights into the attitudes of ordinary women living through and directly affected by the second wave. Moreover, Lieberman's (2016) study demonstrates a change in women's sexual habits—such as the use of vibrators, first orgasms and open discussions about sex—in response to the sexual liberation movement of the second wave. With that being said, this provides space for expansion as my research seeks to qualitatively analyze media and the community of communications that magazines have created to understand how the sexual liberation movement has changed women's sexual and romantic relationships.

To complement the literature's predominantly historical and theoretical approach to the topic, my study seeks to qualitatively analyze media content from the sexual liberation movement. Veering away from critiquing the movement or attempting to label its messages as “good” or “bad,” this study fills a gap in the literature by objectively observing how the movement specifically influenced women's intimate and sexual relationships.

## METHODS

To better understand how women's sexual and romantic relationships changed according to the sexual liberation movement, I collected content women wrote about love, relationships and sex from the 1970s to the 1980s. The second wave of feminism produced an influx of women's magazines that gave relationship advice in line with the principles of the sexual revolution such as how to have better sex, advocate for yourself, be more independent, find fulfillment and so on. These publications created a space and an opportunity for women to share their thoughts, concerns, and vulnerabilities around sex that have been historically suppressed and/or stigmatized. This community of communications thus fought the silence that bell hooks describes as “woman's submission into patriarchal authority (hooks, 2014). Thus, magazines are simultaneously objects of analysis and physical manifestations of liberation.



In these magazines, many women submitted questions, letters to the editor, submissions of personal experiences and gave interviews to columnists for publication. The accounts were provided by North American women aged 14 to 82, with the majority from those between 18 and 40. The vast majority of these women were white middle to upper-class individuals. However, many women anonymized their identities, so this is an approximation and assumption based on the magazines' and the second-wave's targeted demographic. As a white upper-middle-class woman, my social position produced an ingroup bias. Thus, I had assumptions coming into the research process based on personal experiences as a woman with the same social position as the subjects. For instance, informed by personal experience, I could have applied subtext to their claims rather than solely relying on the data. However, because my content was written 50 years ago and 30 years before my lifetime, generational differences removed me from the subjects, allowing for a more objective perspective.

I found my documents through the Women's Magazine Archives database. Over three weeks (February 9<sup>th</sup> to March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024), I collected twelve articles published in six different magazines: *New York Times* (November 1972), *Lady's Home Journal* (March 1975 and July 1979), *Redbook* (June, July 1975 and July 1978), *Women's Day* (October 1977), *Branching Out* (July 1974), and *Cosmopolitan* (July and September 1980). I chose these magazines based on four characteristics: year of publication, the magazines' targeted audience, explicit references to the sexual revolution (women writing "the sexual revolution" or "the new morality" in their comments), relationships, love and/or sex, and if they contained quotes/questions from female readers.

First, I looked at dozens of magazine articles from 1970 to 1980, as I wanted them to be published during the height of the sexual liberation movement. Because my study population is North American women and my research objective is understanding how the sexual revolution impacted their relationships and sex lives, I focused mainly on American and Canadian magazines that had feminist objectives targeted at women. Magazines are agents of socialization, and the women's magazines I chose reverberated messages from the sexual liberation movement. So, those who read and write to these magazines are to some degree impacted by the movement.

Then, I looked for issues and segments relevant to my research question that mentioned romantic relationships and sex. Because I'm looking to uncover women's inner thoughts about their relationships and sexual behaviours, I was not interested in content written by journalists, columnists or editors. They represent a smaller demographic and publish opinions geared toward the magazine's objectives and image. Instead, I sought firsthand narratives from women who consume this media, as my research question examines the impact the movement had on women. This represents a more general population of women with different careers, family structures, and ages, which allows for a more representative sample size. However, because the sexual liberation movement largely excluded women of colour and simplistically focused on the needs of wealthier housewives, the sample population is not representative of all North American women; however, it is representative of the sexual liberation's targeted audience, one that racialized women were indubitably excluded from.

Although my original objective was to analyze Q&A sections solely, I found that many of these sections contained one-liner questions, which did not provide rich data. To address this problem, I expanded my search to any section containing quotes directly from women. Thus, in addition to the Q&A sections, I included three interviews conducted and published in the *New York Times* by Thomas J. Cottle, a professor, sociologist, psychologist and columnist. I also included columns in *Branching Out* that published readers' accounts of their experiences as women. Additionally, I used letters sent to *Women's Day* that included personal experiences of single women, and I collected questions sent to sex counsellors that were answered in *Redbook*. Moreover, I selected articles from *Cosmopolitan* that supported the author's claims through quotes from women as well as polls and questionnaires given to women.

All content was analyzed in chronological order to observe any significant changes over ten years. Overall, the earlier magazines contained more accounts of insecurity, confusion, and fear of the revolution. However, as the revolution progressed into the late 70s and early 80s, there was an increase in positive experiences from the revolution (i.e., independence, agency, confidence). I first read through my articles to become familiar with their contents and gain a general sense of common themes across all twelve articles.

Then, I began the coding process with line-by-line open coding and generated twenty-five open codes, which I organized and colour-coded into an Excel sheet.

The initial coding process revealed two unexpected findings. First, there was a fairly equal divide between negative and positive feelings towards the sexual revolution. The negative accounts expressed having incompatible morals, confusion, and a desire for clear social rules (i.e., “Who’s to say what’s good or bad?” “How can I just let go and forget everything that was so meaningful to me before?” and “They need a cop down here to direct traffic”). The positive accounts expressed renewed agency in independence (i.e., “Society told me that being single would mean being lonely and unhappy—nothing is farther from the truth” and “I now realize I have tolerated such behaviour just to maintain the security of marriage”). They also conveyed a liberation from traditional ideals of sex, including destigmatizing female pleasure (i.e., “no longer does she view sex as an imposition and burden, the way her grandmother’s generation did, nor does she see it as a means to catch a mate, as her mother might have” and “you mean it’s alright for me to have an orgasm while I rub against my lover’s thigh? I always thought I was some sort of pervert!”). Second, I found that the sexual liberation movement impacted women differently depending on their age group. There was a distinct difference in attitudes between young, typically unmarried women aged 14-25 and women who were typically married with children aged 25-60. Generally, they understood and were affected by the movement differently since they were at different stages of life when the movement occurred.

I continued the process with line-by-line focus coding which I organized and colour-coded into an Excel sheet. Then, I narrowed down the twenty-five open codes to six focused codes: Societal Forces, Conflictual Feelings, Aversion to Existing Relationship Structures, Agency, Liberation from Traditional Ideals of Sex and Intergenerational Influences. Finally, this led to the development of three themes: Societal Pressure, Incongruity and Self-Liberation.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Societal Pressure

The power of the sexual liberation movement, or “the new morality,” was not felt subtly nor gradually; instead, its social pressure held a strong presence. Due to the movement, women often felt social pressure to engage in sexual relationships. Accounts in magazines show that the new norms advanced by the revolution were not felt as a gradual socializing process, but something that was forcibly imposed on people. Women said things like, “I have no choice,” “I had to feel like in some way I was a part of it all,” and “Society’s got a hold on your leg.” For youths in particular, the perceived ideals of sexual liberation were seen as mandatory ways of behaving that, if not adhered to, would exclude them from their peers. The mass distribution and popularity of magazines encouraging the sexual revolution amplified the testaments of “liberated” women; this created an enviable ingroup. One college woman said, “I had to feel that in some way I was a part of it all. A part of *them*, the generation.” She wanted to know if she *could* have sex even though she wasn’t sure she wanted to. To fit in, she went so far as thinking of ways she “could arrange to get raped” but settled on getting a diaphragm instead. The dispersal of the revolution’s misconstrued messaging created immense societal pressure, leading some women to extreme and unhealthy thoughts.

Confused by messages from peers and society at large, younger generations predominantly interpreted the movement as encouraging them to be more promiscuous, regardless of their personal preference. One person wrote, “The sexual revolution has made women talk themselves into sexual behaviour they don’t really desire, under the pressure of being labelled uncool or possessive.” Magazines directly contributed to this pressure, acting as a socializing force. For instance, *Cosmopolitan* created an ingroup of “Cosmo girls” with a socially desirable identity defined by sexuality. In 1980, the article titled “The Sexual Profile of That Cosmopolitan Girl” analyzed the sex habits of 106,000 readers and described her through first sexual experiences, turn-ons, sex positions, number of partners. They found she is, “sexy and wild,” often experimenting in bed, but also “romantic and conservative,” with “reservations about living



in a sexually permissive society.” By publicizing readers’ sexual activities and labeling them as “extraordinarily sexually free,” the media glorifies such behavior and pressures women to conform. As such, young women’s sexual habits may not have changed of their own volition, but because they felt forced to change. The movement was mainly intended to free women from constricting marriages and cycles of patriarchal-induced sexual dissatisfaction, and not to force teenagers to have sex. Young women had yet to encounter patriarchal structures of sex and marriage and thus lacked an understanding of the movement’s purpose and objectives. Therefore, youths felt just as socially pressured to have sex as their mothers’ generation felt pressured not to have sex.

For older women, circulating messages promising remedies for their bland marriages and unsatisfactory sex lives were encouraging. Many sought out sex therapists and explored new ways to receive pleasure from sex. One woman hesitantly tried masturbating in front of her husband, and another fantasized about an X-rated movie to improve their sex life with their husband. However, many women in older generations still bought into the societal myth that their husbands should be able to sexually “awaken” them. When they couldn’t orgasm as society dictated, these societal pressures instigated feelings of self-blame and criticism of their husbands. Sexually dissatisfied women often had affairs or decided to divorce as a result of these misleading societal narratives and pressures.

## **Incongruity**

Many women felt the sexual liberation movement’s rhetoric was incongruent with their social codes and previously held belief systems. The “new morality” undermined these moral codes. This created an internal moral struggle, which confused their understanding of sex and relationships. Magazines became the battleground on which conflicting values clashed before readers. They transparently laid out these new confessions, writing that “freedom brings problems, and along with the pleasures of liberation, many women reported new stresses and problems.” Young women battled with deciphering the “right way” to sexually display love. Before the sexual liberation movement, society had strongly entrenched ideas and

morals for women that valued modesty and passivity. These social norms instructed women on how to express sexuality; the expectation was to wait until marriage to have sex. For adolescents in the midst of uncovering and practicing social norms and acceptable behaviours to prepare for adulthood, this adjustment was particularly difficult. One young woman spent her formative years learning to value chastity, but at the height of the sexual liberation movement, she was engaged and strongly desired to have sex. She eventually succumbed and attempted intercourse with her fiancé but started crying hysterically and did not go through with it. Battling between the ideas she grew up with and the idea that sexual desires are permissible for unmarried women, she wrote, "How can I just let go and forget everything that was so meaningful to me before?" Years of being told one must wait until marriage created a conflict between previously held values and those advanced by the sexual revolution.

Others sought to reconcile these incongruent values and expressed a need for more rules, they felt were missing from society amid the sexual revolution. A young woman wrote, "One person says aloneness is right, somebody else says I should find someone to sleep with. I don't know, I don't know." Another person expressed concern over marriages falling apart, increased sexual behaviour and fear of being labelled uptight and said, "They need a cop down here to direct traffic." Although the revolution's 'new morality' encouraged freedom from constricting gender roles in the form of female pleasure, the adjustment was extremely difficult. In terms of young women's sexual relationships, incongruent value systems only added another layer of confusion and insecurity to novel sexual encounters.

Meanwhile, older women and those in marriages displayed behaviours incongruous with their desires. Many women said they wanted to experience sexual pleasure but were unable to take action. The sexual revolution inspired many women to attempt to orgasm, but as one woman said, "I cannot admit that I haven't had an orgasm. I have let the relationship progress too far to be able to say I have been implying (next to lying) otherwise all along." Because of these fears, she has avoided sex altogether. Another woman, "scared to tell [her] husband to change his love-making technique," resorted to masturbating. However, this made her feel "terribly wrong" and "so guilty." Many women experienced this type of internal conflict. Although they wanted to begin enjoying sex, many suffered from conflictual feelings and an

inability to properly communicate their needs. Often, what they desired sexually was either incongruent with what they told their partners or incongruent with their conscience. This led women to avoid sex altogether or continue to have unsatisfactory sex lives. However, some of these accounts came from Q&A sections, so women wanted a change since they were seeking advice. One could thus infer women began to take accountability and advocate for their sexual pleasure.

## **Self-Liberation**

The sexual liberation movement pushed many women to advocate for themselves, discover their bodies and communicate their needs. Together, women experienced self-liberation. This affected their relationships and sex lives in a few ways. First, the revolution freed young and older women from sexual shame by normalizing previously taboo behaviours such as increased promiscuity, masturbation, casual sex and divorce. Women were open about having multiple sex partners, as one said, “I have had twenty-eight lovers, one for each of my years,” and another said she “kept a sex journal since 1962” to keep track of all eighty of her lovers. Furthermore, a woman determined yet unable to have an orgasm with her boyfriend, asked her partner to try another technique she may enjoy more, but said he “refused to believe me.” So, she wrote, “I’m planning to move on, find another man.” Inspired by the movement, she displays a wider trend of women leaving marriages to feel heard, respected and sexually satisfied. For these women, being married and adhering to societal expectations is the opposite of independence and freedom.

In the article “*Can a Woman Stay Single and Be Happy?*” the answer was an overwhelming yes. None of them expressed regret; instead, they believed they would not have had so many accomplishments if they had married. While this article expresses data proving the self-liberating effects of the movement, these magazines are also responsible for encouraging other women to follow suit. Responses addressed the main concerns of women unsure to leave their marriages by describing their accomplishments: “I’m forty-one and still single.... I adopted a baby girl” and “[I] received my bachelor’s at fifty” and “I slowly

began to see what I was capable of being totally independent.” Magazines served as a platform for affirmation, fostering a community that validated and encouraged women’s choices. Furthermore, magazines spread the message of self-liberation to subsequent generations. Many women expressed a warning-like desire for their children’s experiences to be better. Those who felt unable to obtain such independence wrote things like, “I am what you call a passive, dependent wife...Too late for me. But I’m going to ask my eighteen-year-old daughter to read the article.” Thus, women experienced a liberation, if not for themselves, then for their children.

Overall, the movement encouraged women to see themselves as capable individuals as well as compel society to recognize them as human beings, rather than passive objects. Eloquently put, one woman wrote, “We no longer have to be the Mothers of civilization – it’s a grown child. Let’s stop being Mothers and Wives and start being Women.” As a result of the movement, many women took control over their relationships and sex lives.

## DISCUSSION

The sexual liberation movement’s impact on women’s sexual and romantic relationships was not monolithic. Its popular rhetoric of freeing captive women from the intimate constraints of their marriage and unsatisfactory sex lives proves to be much more nuanced. To understand the root of these nuances, my research reveals there are two different, yet interrelated narratives. One from young unmarried women (roughly 14-25 years old) and another from older women, typically married with children (roughly 25-60 years old).

This difference is grounded in the semantics of the sexual liberation movement. At its core, it is a rallying call for women to be *liberated from* patterns of sexual dissatisfaction and gender-biased relationship structures. Concepts of relationships and sexuality are socially constructed patriarchal systems designed to oppress women; therefore, they are the very structures women seek liberation from.



However, most young women have not encountered these structures. Yet to experience the patriarchal institution of marriage and the unequal power dynamics of sex, this younger generation still buys into the ideals and promises of love. As such, the thing that women are trying to be liberated from differs depending on their stage in life. For older women, it is mainly their unsatisfying marriages and sex lives, but for younger women, it is simply the moral codes society has sold them as ideal (i.e., the white picket fence). Generally, these traditional values and morals provide youths with comfort, stability and regulation in the face of daunting adulthood. For many older women, these empty promises provide constraint, dissatisfaction, and unfulfillment. Summarized by a twenty-five-year-old woman, "The sexual revolution has been very enlightening to many women older than me... My mother has profited from it. But I grew up in the midst of it, and sometimes I wish the pendulum would sit where it is for a while." As such, the movement's intended impacts were most positively assumed by older generations attempting to escape patriarchal constructions of love, whereas youths got caught in the crosshairs of a complex rebellion against unrecognized structures of gender oppression.

Although changes in women's sexual and romantic relationships differed depending on age, changes in social norms were uniformly felt. These changes were described by both generations based on three consistent factors: societal influence, incongruity, and self-liberation. For younger women, shifting social norms felt abrupt, and their social prescriptions were understood as dictating and controlling, despite their intention of being liberating. Most of their discomfort and aversion to the movement stemmed from the incongruity of previously held belief systems and the new morality. Conversely, older women found these narratives exciting, inspiring and promising. However, desires to adopt sexually liberating behaviours were often incongruous with their actions as they suffered from internalized misogyny, shaming them for sexual pleasure.

Those who overcame these mental blockades exhibited newfound confidence, independence, and ultimately, self-liberation. This took the form of sexual exploration, first orgasms, cheating and divorce. Meanwhile, for younger women who adopted their understanding of the new morality, self-liberation took the form of polyamory, casual sex, and waiting until marriage. However, increased promiscuity may not

have directly resulted from the movement. Instead, my data found patterns of mothers urging their daughters to approach love and sex differently than they did. Furthermore, increases in divorce and affairs among older women could have provoked sexual deviance in their children. In this light, increased promiscuity among youth should not be understood as a direct result of the sexual liberation movement, but as a result of the effects the movement had on older women.

Extracted from popular women's magazines, these findings suggest two broad conclusions. First, for older women, the sexual liberation movement changed women's sexual and romantic relationships as there was an increase in divorce, extramarital affairs and experiences of sexual pleasure. Second, for younger women, the sexual liberation movement contradicted previous conceptions of sex and romantic relationships, thus provoking insecurity and a lack of a moral compass. My findings suggest that youths' increase in casual sex and delaying marriage did not arise out of a positive and willing place like their mothers. Rather, it was a result of social pressure and familial instability.

### **Situating within the Literature**

While literature published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the sexual liberation movement's impact remains limited, existing studies are embedded with debates about the political significance of sex and whether it is productive for achieving gender equality. Gerhard (2000) argues why the sexual liberation movement found female sexuality politically significant, whereas Betty Friedan (1963) disagreed; meanwhile, Lieberman (2016), Gil-Glazer (2020) and Riviere et al. (2013) discussed both sides without taking a firm position. Consistent with the dichotomous nature of the debate, my findings show it was both positive and negative for accomplishing feminist objectives. However, my study contributes to this debate by suggesting the divisive reception of the movement is generational.

The literature holds significant theoretical utility in academic and political contexts, but it falls short of studying the public's reception of the movement. In other words, studies have not sought to explore

whether or not the very targets of the movement felt as though the movement had political implications for feminist agendas. Highlighting the importance of sociological qualitative methods and media studies to the study of the sexual liberation movement, my study fills this gap by analyzing what women thought, said and wrote about the movement as it unfolded through published media.

My findings suggest women did not explicitly link sexual liberation to political rights. Although scholars may have been having this debate, the average woman did not link the sexual liberation movement to their political rights as an oppressed minority. However, what can be substantiated is that it changed social norms and encouraged women to take control of their personal lives, gradually dismantling gendered power dynamics within the private sphere. Before, social norms around relationships and sex placed the woman as sexually passive, needless and undeserving of equal enjoyment of sex. The movement, and the magazines themselves, encouraged advocacy and turned women into active agents. Regardless of whether or not women acknowledged the political implications of sex, the sexual revolution advanced feminist agendas as it encouraged women to advocate for themselves and rebel against patriarchal constructions of sex.

Considering the movement produced profound ideological struggles and moral discomfort for younger generations (aged 14-25), directions for future studies may examine its long-term effects concerning present-day feminist issues. *Roe v. Wade*, a Supreme Court decision made in 1973 as a result of the sexual revolution, was overturned in 2022 by the generation I found most opposed to the sexual liberation movement. Once grappling with a profound loss of morality, the majority of 60–70-year-olds oppose access to abortion (Gallup, 2024). With political power, these lost teens overturned what their mothers worked so hard for. Future studies may explore this speculation.

## CONCLUSION

Reflected through popular feminist magazines in the 70s–80s, the sexual liberation movement changed older women's sexual and romantic relationships as these new social norms revolutionarily encouraged women to advocate for themselves within sexual relationships. For younger women, the movement triggered moral ambiguity and normalized premarital casual sex. These changes broke down some of the longstanding sexual norms constructed by misogynist men whose social position hinged on women's subordination across public and private spheres. The implications of these findings underscore the importance of sociological qualitative research in studying the sexual revolution. Paying attention to the humanistic dynamics of a political movement, this study elucidates where women felt positive and negative change. Changes in women's sexual relationships should be conceptualized as changes in women's social position. Despite these shifts, the fight is far from over. Many women continue to subjugate their voice and pleasure to that of a man. The revolution requires careful revision and a rigorous revival.



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# **Between Helplessness and Hostility Analyzing CNN's Racialized Framing of Palestinians in Crisis**

**Tasbeeha Shahzad**

## **Abstract**

This essay critically examines CNN's portrayal of Palestinians during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, focusing on how Orientalist and racialized narratives shape public perceptions of Palestinian identity. The analysis argues that CNN's coverage perpetuates stereotypes by framing Palestinians as either passive victims or violent aggressors, depending on the context. This dual framing obscures the political and historical complexities of the genocide, reducing Palestinians to dehumanized subjects within a broader narrative that privileges Western power and perspectives. Specific linguistic choices, such as references to Gaza's population density and restricted mobility, normalize suffering and present the crisis as an inherent consequence of cultural or regional factors rather than systemic oppression. Additionally, the essay critiques the use of humanitarian language, which reinforces perceptions of Palestinians as dependent on international aid while simultaneously undermining their agency and self-determination. These portrayals align with dominant ideological narratives that justify foreign intervention, perpetuate power imbalances, and frame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in ways that uphold existing global hierarchies. By deconstructing these framing strategies, the essay highlights the role of even the 'liberal' media in reinforcing Orientalist ideologies and calls for reimagining of journalistic practices to promote justice, equity, and agency. This analysis contributes to the ongoing critique of media representations of marginalized groups and underscores the need for narratives that challenge stereotypes and promote a deeper understanding of the conflict's root causes.

## **Keywords**

Framing analysis, media representation, Orientalism, news coverage, Palestine, CNN



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Media narratives do more than report—they actively shape perceptions and reinforce underlying political agendas, especially in the portrayal of conflict zones where identity often intersects with violence, resistance, and suffering. One such area is the ongoing Palestinian genocide, where racial and cultural representations are deeply entangled with political agendas and historical biases. The CNN article, “Nowhere to go’: Ordinary Palestinians live in fear as Israel retaliates against Hamas,” illustrates the complex depiction of Palestinians as a racialized and contested identity within this prolonged conflict. This analysis employs a framing analysis to uncover how CNN’s language, structure, and tone shape the public’s perception of the Palestinian identity and the broader conflict. Framing analysis is a media studies method that examines how certain elements of a story, such as word choice, sourcing, visual imagery, and narrative emphasis, are selectively highlighted to influence audience interpretation. In this paper, the focus lies specifically on linguistic cues, rhetorical contrasts (such as “victim” vs. “aggressor”), and the use of humanitarian or decontextualized language that reinforces Orientalist and racialized narratives. By analyzing these frames, the paper reveals how CNN’s coverage subtly aligns with dominant ideological discourses that distort the reality of Palestinian resistance and suffering.

Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, refers to the Western tradition of depicting Eastern societies, particularly Arab, Muslim, and Asian cultures, as exotic, irrational, violent, and inferior in order to justify colonial dominance. This body of thought positions the “Orient” as fundamentally different from and subordinate to the West. Within this framework, Palestinians are framed as a racialized “Other,” consistently depicted through tropes of savagery, backwardness, and perpetual violence. In Ibrahim Dahman’s CNN article, the phrase “No strangers to war with Israel, many Gazans are sheltering in their homes, with the vast majority lacking access to bunkers” reflects this ideological framing. It suggests that war is a normalized, almost expected part of Palestinian life, framing conflict not as a political emergency, but as a cultural condition. This portrayal aligns with Said’s theory, which argues that non-Western subjects are often constructed as inherently unstable and bound to cycles of violence, thereby legitimizing Western dominance (Said, 1979). Media scholar Pavel Doboš (2019) similarly notes that coverage of distant suffering often renders non-Western populations as permanently tragic, reducing them to passive subjects of pity rather

than political actors. Crucially, these framings are not just cultural generalizations; they are racialized constructions. Framing Eastern or Muslim groups as inherently violent ties into a broader history of racial thinking that casts these populations as fundamentally irrational, dangerous, and inferior to the supposedly civilized and rational West. This racial logic supports and sustains systems of global inequality by marking certain lives as more disposable or less grievable. By portraying Gazans as accustomed to war, the article strips away the immediacy of their suffering and flattens Palestinian identity into a static, decontextualized stereotype. The result is a narrative that reinforces the Orientalist myth of the Middle East as an inherently chaotic and incomprehensible region, desensitizing Western audiences to the political roots and real-time urgency of the violence.

Building on this racialized portrayal of Palestinians as inherently violent or tragic, the article also reinforces the notion of Palestinian identity as static and subordinate through its focus on spatial confinement and restriction. The article's description of Gaza as "densely populated" and facing "severe restrictions" perpetuates this image of Palestinians as confined and victimized, reinforcing the assumption of a static identity. Such depictions align with Said's argument that Orientalist portrayals consistently diminish the agency and diversity of Eastern groups, rendering them as passive subjects within a Western ideological frame. By framing Palestinians within these static tropes, the CNN article not only sustains racial stereotypes but contributes to an overarching narrative that justifies foreign intervention and political control. In limiting Palestinian identity to either victimhood or barbarism, the article implicitly aligns with the Orientalist view of the East as a cultural and moral "Other," suggesting that Palestinians require control or intervention to overcome their perceived backwardness. It must be noted that while Gaza is indeed densely populated and faces severe restrictions, the issue isn't the factuality of these descriptors, but rather how they're used in a way that shapes readers' perceptions of Palestinians. Media can selectively emphasize certain facts to support an ideological narrative, often subtly portraying the situation as natural or preordained, rather than a consequence of specific political actions or power imbalances. For instance, by continually focusing on Gaza's population density and restrictions without delving into why these conditions exist or the systems enforcing them, the article risks framing these realities as inherent to Palestinian life rather than as outcomes of specific policies and historical forces.



The political implications of this normalization are profound. While Simon Cottle's work examines media's handling of global risks and crises, he emphasizes that media representations are increasingly influenced by underlying narratives that shape public perception, especially in high-stakes conflicts. Cottle argues that media coverage does more than inform; it often channels certain moral imperatives that subtly direct public sentiment and engagement (Cottle, 2014, p. 14). In this case, framing Palestinians as recurrently embroiled in conflict could serve to distance Western audiences emotionally, presenting Gazan suffering as an inherent part of their existence rather than a product of specific political circumstances. Western media often frames "disasters" through ideological lenses that portray Eastern lives as fixed in cycles of misfortune and conflict (Cottle, 2014, p.13). This persistent framing encourages audiences to view conflict in Gaza as less of a human crisis and more of an "inevitable" condition, shaping public perception in ways that align with broader political agendas. This rhetorical approach risks numbing Western readers to the urgent humanitarian crises faced by Palestinians, ultimately sustaining a racialized view of Middle Eastern identities as perpetually embroiled in violence. In doing so, the media inadvertently supports political narratives that overlook or justify the lack of intervention, implicitly relegating Palestinian suffering to the margins of international concern.

Additionally, media framing of Middle Eastern conflicts frequently simplifies narratives by emphasizing binary roles like "victims" and "aggressors," which makes distant conflicts more digestible to Western readers. Such representations, as Matt Evans contends, limit public understanding by presenting conflicts as fixed and repetitive, fostering a sense of disengagement and moral detachment among audiences. By using language such as "Ordinary Palestinians" vs " Hamas," the article's title subtly reinforces Orientalist perceptions, framing them as either passive sufferers or habitual aggressors—both of which obscure the actual humanitarian impact of the violence in Gaza. Chomsky's perspective on media as a tool for state propaganda is relevant here. He argues that the media often aligns with dominant political narratives, which, in this case, reinforces Western and Israeli state perspectives by portraying Palestinian resistance primarily through a "terrorist" lens. This serves the purpose of justifying certain policies and military actions, ensuring public opinion remains supportive or at least compliant with these measures.

In addition, by framing the Israeli military offensive in Gaza as a “war,” the CNN article implies a false equivalency between the Israeli and Palestinian forces, obscuring the stark power imbalance that defines this conflict. This language not only minimizes the severity of Palestinian suffering but also contributes to a narrative that normalizes disproportionate violence. As Matt Evans argues, media coverage of Middle Eastern conflicts frequently relies on terms that imply parity between opposing sides, regardless of their actual military capacities or resources (Evans, 2010, p. 223). This language misrepresents the situation by placing Palestinians, who have limited access to resources, shelter, and defense, on the same footing as one of the most advanced and well-funded militaries in the world. The term “war” masks the one-sided nature of the violence, subtly suggesting that Palestinians are capable participants in a balanced battle, rather than a predominantly civilian population facing an overwhelming military force.

This narrative strategy further aligns with Said’s concept of Orientalism, which explains how the Western portrayal of Eastern conflicts often emphasizes irrational hostility and violence, presenting Eastern groups as combative and culturally predisposed to conflict. By referring to the Israeli-Palestinian violence as a “war,” the media subtly racializes Palestinians as inherently militant and aggressive, which reinforces stereotypes that distance them from Western audiences. Said explains that the Orientalist narrative positions non-Western populations as part of a “culture of violence,” thus framing them as perpetual threats rather than victims or oppressed populations (Said, 1979, p.5). This Orientalist framing prevents readers from perceiving the Palestinian plight as a humanitarian crisis, downplaying the possibility of genocide by rebranding it as a symmetric and routine military engagement.

The implications of this framing are ideologically significant, as this portrayal has the effect of manufacturing public consent by shaping perceptions in ways that justify foreign policy decisions and discourage interventions that might challenge the status quo. When Western media frames the situation in Gaza as a “war” rather than an asymmetric humanitarian crisis, it obscures the systematic nature of the violence, rendering the atrocities as the unavoidable outcomes of a complex “conflict” rather than as preventable or unjust acts of aggression. This terminology aligns with Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model, which describes how media often serves to normalize state violence by framing it as necessary self-defense

against dangerous, racialized others (Mullen & Klaehn, 2010, p. 220). The “war” framing thus becomes a powerful rhetorical tool that deflects accusations of genocide, recasting Israeli military action as a proportionate response within a balanced conflict.

The use of the term “war” also has a numbing effect on Western readers, as it positions the violence inflicted on Gazans within the familiar framework of military conflict rather than as a potential genocide. Framing tactics like these encourage public disengagement by transforming crises into routine events, implicitly justifying ongoing violence. Furthermore, by treating the conflict as a “war,” the article invites readers to view Palestinian casualties as collateral damage in an unfortunate but equal battle, rather than as targeted/intentional victims of disproportionate violence. This framing sustains an ideological narrative that diminishes the urgency of Palestinian suffering, allowing Western audiences to remain detached in the face of ongoing human rights violations.

Furthermore, beyond its framing of Palestinians as either helpless victims or violent aggressors, the CNN article also employs humanitarian language that reinforces a racialized portrayal of Palestinians as dependent on Western aid. By only describing the extreme conditions in Gaza in a way that highlights restrictions and the lack of essential resources, the article presents Palestinians primarily as passive recipients of aid, a narrative that evokes both pity and a sense of helplessness. This portrayal, while grounded in real hardships, risks obscuring Palestinian agency by framing their suffering as a static condition mitigated only by external assistance.

Humanitarian language in Western media often subtly frames non-Western populations as fundamentally reliant on foreign intervention for survival, which reinforces racialized assumptions about their perceived incapacity to alter their circumstances. The CNN article’s references to Gaza as an “open-air prison” with “no electricity, no food, no fuel” convey the severity of the crisis but also cast Palestinians in a role of passive dependence. The media’s focus on humanitarian narratives in conflict zones can serve to reinforce Western ideological stances by positioning non-Western populations as subjects of pity rather than political actors with agency. This framing influences how readers perceive Palestinian identity, subtly suggesting that Palestinians are incapable of self-sufficiency or self-determination without foreign aid. The ideological implications of this framing are significant. Noam Chomsky’s Propaganda Model emphasizes

that media narratives often support state policies and foreign aid agendas, framing aid as a benevolent necessity rather than examining the structural conditions that necessitate it (Herman & Chomsky, 2011). By highlighting Palestinians' need for basic resources without addressing the historical and political factors that have created these conditions, the article reinforces a racialized portrayal of Palestinians as perpetually dependent on Western aid. This framing aligns with Said's critique of Orientalism, which explains how Western narratives often depict Eastern populations as static, unable to control their circumstances, and in need of Western intervention. Through this lens, the article's humanitarian language inadvertently sustains a racialized view of Palestinians as reliant on foreign support, diverting attention from the broader political struggle for autonomy and human rights.

Furthermore, by focusing on the absence of basic resources and portraying Western aid as the primary recourse, the article frames Western intervention as the only practical response to Palestinian suffering. This approach can have a numbing effect on Western readers, framing the crisis as an unfortunate but static condition that requires continuous assistance, rather than as an injustice demanding structural change. In this way, the humanitarian language used in the article reinforces a passive perception of Palestinian identity, overshadowing Palestinian agency and resilience in favour of a narrative of dependence. This framing aligns with Orientalist and racialized assumptions that portray Eastern populations as lacking the ability to self-govern or overcome adversity without Western help, shaping how Western audiences perceive and respond to the Palestinian plight.

To conclude, the media's portrayal of Palestinian identity within conflict zones is deeply but subtly influenced by racialized narratives and Orientalist tropes that frame Palestinians as inherently linked to violence, helplessness, and dependency. These depictions do more than describe a distant conflict, they shape Western perceptions and reinforce state agendas. By presenting Palestinians either as passive victims of unavoidable hardship or as aggressors in a seemingly endless "war," the media perpetuates a skewed view that normalizes suffering and minimizes the urgency of Palestinian humanity and agency. This framework discourages Western audiences from critically examining the power imbalances and political systems perpetuating these crises, reducing a complex humanitarian issue to an inevitable cultural conflict. Importantly, these narratives reflect a distinctly Western viewpoint, one that positions the West as morally

superior, rational, and benevolent, in contrast to an irrational and violent “Eastern” Other. As Said argues, Orientalism is not just a system of stereotypes, but a political ideology that sustains Western dominance by naturalizing its authority over the East. The CNN article, while appearing neutral, participates in this tradition by framing Palestinian suffering through a lens that distances, decontextualizes, and implicitly justifies foreign control. The implications of such portrayals are profound: they not only dehumanize those affected by conflict but also shape global attitudes and policies that can overlook, excuse, or even endorse ongoing injustices. A shift toward narratives that emphasize Palestinian agency and highlight the political realities shaping their struggles could challenge these racialized tropes, fostering a more nuanced understanding that prioritizes justice over stereotype. By rethinking how media frames the identities within such conflicts, there is potential to inspire more informed, empathetic, and just international responses.

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# **The Palestine Within**

## **Exploring Diasporic Identity, Emotional Struggle, and Social Media's Role in Shaping Resistance and Belonging**

### **Aniliese Spencer**

#### **Abstract**

The Palestine Within, an auto-ethnography, explores the complex relationship between the way in which individuals of Palestinian descent living in the West perceive their cultural and ethnic identity and how the ongoing genocide in Palestine is portrayed on social media. As an individual of Palestinian descent myself, over the course of a week-long data collection process I compiled and analyzed media content from the social media applications of Instagram and TikTok, journaling emotional reactions, themes, and concepts evoked by each post in the process. The research aimed to explore how the cultural identity of individuals apart of diasporic communities are shaped by the representation of Palestine within social media content, which amplified feelings of guilt, alienation, and moral conflict. Three key findings were revealed following a thematic analysis: (1) an internal conflict between Canadian/Western identity and Palestinian ethnicity, (2) the emotional struggle of questioning one's legitimacy in expressing Palestinian identity amidst the genocide, and (3) the privilege and responsibility of Palestinians in the West to engage in resistance and activism. Using the words written in the journals during the data collection process to inform a poetic literary response, I crafted a poem to express the nuanced emotions and reflections that arose from the data collection process. The project culminated in a visual body art-in-motion performance that embodied the key findings, combining interpretive art with poetry to convey the emotional complexity of the diaspora experience during a crisis. This study illustrates the difficulties diaspora communities encounter in balancing their lived experiences in the West with their ancestral ties by examining the emotional and social effects of media consumption on identity formation. The findings underscore the power of social media in shaping identity and activism, highlighting the role of diaspora communities in global resistance movements, even from afar.

#### **Keywords**

Auto-ethnography, Palestine, social media representation, poetry, art-in-motion, Western identity, Palestinian identity

Link to the final piece: <https://youtu.be/tITz2LR8C1M>

## Introduction

Growing up as an individual of Palestinian descent, my grandfather had taught us many words to describe the state of our ancestral homeland. Intolerance. Segregation. Colonialism. Displacement. Apartheid. These words, the words that described the barriers placed upon my family, were words that I had always understood as being extreme. I believed that these words reflected the worst circumstances that any group of people in this world could face in the 21st century. Today, like every other day before that for the past two years, I have woken up to new words being used to describe the state of our ancestral homeland. Expulsion. Famine. Siege. War Crimes. Genocide. The word “genocide” was a word that I could never have imagined being used to describe the state of Palestine. However, according to the United Nations, since October 7th, 2023, more than 45,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza (United Nations, 2024). For nearly two years, the people of Palestine have suffered a devastating humanitarian crisis and widespread destruction by Israeli military operations, resulting in the death of hundreds of Palestinian civilians every day (Türk, 2024). Furthermore, since 2023, media content pertaining to the ongoing genocide in Palestine has been dominating social media platforms, creating distinct polarization between pro-Palestine and pro-Israel users. Social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, have served as key tools to inform, spread news, and share the voices and the personal experiences of individuals and families affected by the genocide. These platforms have become spaces where diverse and often conflicting narratives about the Palestinian genocide circulate. This overwhelming mix of content, including activism, denial, and dehumanization, has left individuals of Palestinian descent questioning what it means to be Palestinian in a world where being Palestinian is so ambivalent. This brings me to the research question I would like to explore in this project, which is “How does the way in which social media portrays the ongoing genocide in Palestine influence the perception of the identities of individuals of Palestinian descent?”.

As an individual of Palestinian descent living in the West myself, I have a personal connection to this research question. Prior to completing this project, I noticed the way in which the media I was consuming pertaining to the genocide in Palestine was able to enact varying emotional reactions within

me. Whether they were positive or negative, I saw that the different perspectives within the pieces of social media content regarding the genocide in Palestine brought to light new issues of this matter and had an influence on the way I perceived my identity. I wanted to explore whether the way social media frames issues like the genocide in Palestine can have profound effects on how Palestinians perceived within the global community and how this effects the way in which Palestinians living in the West perceive their cultural identities. By researching this topic, my aim was to better understand these dynamics and explore the impact media narratives have on identity formation and self-perception of Palestinians living in the West. Though this topic encompasses a personal experience I face, the academic inquiry into this topic hopes to resonate with the experiences and challenges faced by other members of diaspora communities living in the West.

## **Review of Literature**

Since the end of 2023, news and stories about the genocide in Palestine have circulated widely on social media, leading to increasingly polarized perspectives on the issue, particularly across social media platforms. Naturally, this has led to a rise in bias and misinformation within the coverage on the genocide in Palestine, most notably using media framing to portray Palestinian culture in a negative way that allows for misrepresentation to occur. According to Meeks (2019), framing is a technique that emphasizes only certain parts of reality by using or omitting certain words, phrases, images, sources, or statements that shape how information is understood. Though the means of framing is varied within social media platforms, studies have shown that this technique has been used across various forms of contemporary and traditional media to construct a specific image and message of how audiences should be engaging with and perceiving the middle eastern, and consequently, Palestinian culture (Naji & Iwar, 2013).

The use of media framing to misrepresent the Palestinian narrative can first be explored in the context of the representation of Muslims and individuals of Arab descent in traditional forms of media in Western societies. It is understood that Western media outlets use methods of meaning-making—through the construction of news by continually presenting specific pictures and words while highlighting these Middle Eastern cultures and religions— and framing to associate Muslims and individuals of Arab descent

with certain stereotypes to portray these cultures in a way that entails society to perceive them as “other”, alien, and distant outsiders. This allows Western audiences to frame these misrepresented cultures as ‘us’ vs ‘them’, which consequently entails Western societies to dissociate and dehumanize Muslims and individuals of Arab descent (Naji & Iwar, 2013; Hall, 2024).

Furthermore, when considering the impact of framing on Palestinian communities, the concept can be illustrated through the portrayal of Israeli-Palestinians by Israeli media outlets, a community that disproportionately suffers from high levels of violence, alienation, and overall discrimination within this region, in a violent and criminally-charged context. This use of media framing has led Israeli-Palestinians to view themselves negatively and feel doubt in their Palestinian identities (Shomrom & Schejter, 2021).

This raises concerns about whether entrenched political, cultural and institutional bias makes these organizations compliant and hypocritical instruments of power instead of reliable news sources and showcases the biases and double-standards Western media outlets hold against Arab populations in the Middle East (Hall, 2024). However, when it comes to information regarding global conflict, individuals may not rely on traditional and social media to inform themselves. The idea of digital diplomacy on public reception showcases that during times of crisis, individuals tend to rely on information from governments, emphasizing the role governments play within the top-down dissemination of information within the media (Atad et al., 2023).

Though Palestinians may be subject to framing within traditional forms of media, current social media forums offer Palestinians a new form of contemporary expression. Amid the ongoing genocide, these platforms have allowed the Palestinian community to share their culture with global audiences. This has allowed for cultural symbols—specifically the thobe and keffiyeh—to be widely recognized as representations of the Palestinian identity (Abu-Ayyash, 2024). Social media has thus allowed the Palestinian community to create their own cultural narrative, which has allowed Palestinians to challenge colonization, and preserve their national cultural identity (Abu-Ayyash, 2024). Finally, the education system of Palestine is shaped by the West, Israel, and the nation of Palestine simultaneously, highlighting the challenge Palestinian students’ face in the context of defining their perceived individual identities (Nasser, 2019).

In terms of creative work, this project aligns with the tradition of poetic, visual, and performative art used as activism. Works that combine poetry and visual storytelling, like those by Shirin Neshat and Mahmoud Darwish, served as inspiration for the production of this piece. A significant influence on Neshat's work has been her use of photography and video to convey themes of identity and exile, especially in her use of visual media to address emotional displacement and political violence. Inspiration was mainly drawn from her series of photographic work, *Women of Allah* (1997), that feature images of Iranian women with words taken from religious texts written on their portraits. Further, Mahmoud Darwish, a Palestinian poet, was another source of inspiration for the development of the poetic aspect for this piece. His work, such as *Awraq al-zaytun* (Leaves of the Olive Tree) (Darwish, M., 2013), is deeply tied to the experience of exile, loss, and the complexities of Palestinian identity. Like Darwish, poetry was used as a tool in this piece to address the emotional struggles faced by Palestinians in diaspora and the role they can play in resistance, even when geographically removed from the Violence.

Through the exploration of this research, it is evident there is an understanding of the way in which Palestinians are represented within the media, how Palestinians express their culture within the digital sphere, and factors that play a role in shaping the identities of Palestinian individuals. A knowledge gap that can be observed throughout every article presented is how these concepts change in response to the current ongoing genocide. The analysis of these articles exhibits a lack of exploration into how forms of contemporary media convey information regarding the ongoing genocide and how this directly influences the perceived identity of ethnically Palestinian individuals.

## **Method**

### **Research Methodology**

According to Ellis et al. (2011), autoethnography is a method for research and writing that aims to understand cultural experience by describing and methodologically analyzing personal experience. Autoethnography builds from individuals' personal experiences by turning them into an analysis and interpretation of an entire culture (Snyder, 2015). This approach to conducting research aims to challenge

standard ways of completing research, such as through deductive, empirical, and strictly scientific methods, by allowing the process of conducting research to be inductive, interpretive, and deeply personal to allow for more thorough and diverse contributions of knowledge to be made within the social sciences (Ellis et al., 2011). As this research centers individuals of Palestinian descent living in the West, this autoethnographic study offers unique insights into how social media influences diaspora Palestinians' perceptions of the genocide in our ancestral homeland, viewed through my own perspective as a member of this community. Furthermore, in addition to employing autoethnography as a research method, data is collected through the systematic journaling of personal emotions and recurring themes, followed by a critical analysis of these entries to support the development of the autoethnographic narrative.

Previous research has demonstrated that personal journal entries can serve as a valuable source of rich qualitative data across a range of research methodologies beyond autoethnography. For instance, according to Friedemann et al. (2011), due to the width, breadth, and depth of the information they offer, the use of study participants' journals has been recognized as a valuable approach for gathering qualitative data. In their research study, reflexive personal journal entries written by interviewers during semi-qualitative interviews were used as methods of data collection. The collection of personal journal entries as primary qualitative data granted researchers the ability to analyze intimate, introspective, and emotionally charged perspectives of sensitive topics in healthcare from research participants that may have been difficult to obtain through interviews alone (Friedemann et al., 2011). Additionally, research completed by Akinreni et al. (2024) has assessed the efficacy of personal journals and diaries for qualitative research studies, describing personal journals as effective qualitative research tools. This study was able to evaluate the use of journals and diaries across other literature, determining that this is a viable method of primary data collection. Their primary strength lies in its ability to grant participants with more time and privacy for self-reflection and the processing of their experiences, enhancing the research participants' ability to achieve deeper self-expression and meaningful personal insight.

Therefore, this research methodology best suits this research project as it enables for a reflexive, embodied understanding of how cultural identity, collective memory, and intergenerational struggle is shaped by social media and perceived and emotionally processed by diaspora Palestinians. This research offers a voice that showcases this issue from the direct perspective of a Palestinian individual living in the West who is actively consuming this Western media pertaining to the genocide. This contributes to research by providing an analysis that seeks to offer a personal account of the knowledge gap at hand which differs greatly from the research typically completed on this issue, as it traditionally seems to come from individuals with no personal involvement to the issue, that don't benefit from understanding the notion of the connection to identity that this research proposes.

### **Data Collection**

To collect data, purposive sampling was implemented, as content that met certain criteria was intentionally selected rather than randomly sampled. Every day over the course of one week, I saved and compiled the first 10 pieces of media content pertaining to the genocide in Palestine that I came across on the social media platforms of Instagram and TikTok each day. This means that by the end of the week, I had collected seventy pieces of content for analysis. At the same time as I completed this process of data collection, I journaled the emotions, common themes, and concepts understood and revealed to me within each individual piece of content and attached these pieces of reflection next to the piece of content I reflected on. Additionally, I created a summary of the commonalities I found between all 10 pieces of content, 5 pieces of content for each platform, at the end of every day. Additionally, I also changed the key words I wrote in the search bar to input every day so that I could receive more diverse and well-rounded content.

My goal was to not select any specific units of content, as I wanted to ensure that I maintained the non-directional nature of social media feeds in order to make sure that the content I received was as unbiased—from those in support, against, and who have neutral perspectives—and diverse as possible. I wanted to ensure that the content I received was as broad as possible so that the content consumed on my



feed could emulate popular content that most other individuals who are searching up the same keywords may receive on their feeds within the broader context of social media.

## **Thematic Analysis**

In order to successfully answer this research question and evaluate the way in which I, as an individual of Palestinian descent living in the West, perceive my Palestinian identity during a time where individuals living in Palestine are currently affected by an ongoing genocide that has been dominating content within social media platforms, I completed a thematic analysis. This thematic analysis entailed a few analysis steps so that I could really dive deep into the various themes present within the journals I completed during the data collection process.

Firstly, I read every journal entry piece I wrote regarding each piece of content I came across within the week I completed this research. I wrote down the main themes I noticed within each of these entries and assigned each of them a colour. Afterwards, I re-read each journal entry piece I wrote and highlighted each of the different major themes I recognized in their respective colours. This first thematic analysis step allowed me to fully analyze and reflect on the common themes, emotions, and concepts understood and revealed to me within the content I interpreted and consumed over the research period.

Secondly, to create a thematic analysis for the common themes I understood throughout my interpretation of the content I came across during the data collection process, I created a word cloud. As part of my final project requires me to write a piece of poetry regarding the way I perceive my Palestinian identity, I thought a word cloud would allow me to effectively organize and compile the common themes, concepts, and emotions extracted from the social media content within the written journal pieces in order to conduct a literary thematic analysis of the data. Using this word cloud and the words within them, I was able to construct a piece of poetic literature that effectively encompassed the language I used within the journal entries to convey the way I perceived the social media content pertaining to the ongoing genocide in Palestine.

## Results

To showcase the findings, I discovered throughout this project that I wanted to create a visual body art-in-motion performance piece accompanied by poetry. I wanted to incorporate a written piece within my project to convey the exact language I used within the journal entries I wrote to convey my perception of the media content I consumed in a direct way, while still creating an interpretive visual piece.

The choice of a visual body-canvas performance and poetry served as a medium to convey both the visible and invisible dimensions of identity. The body canvas art-in-motion performance piece allowed me to embody the fluctuating waves of varying emotional moments of personal reflection that emerged during the data collection and thematic analysis processes. Rather than producing static images, live art was used to express the way in which the themes highlighted within these findings transformed, changed, and fluctuated the more the data was analyzed.

Through the fluidity and tension of the body, this piece embodied the emotional and psychological spaces explored, channeling these reflections directly into the movements within this performance. My movements and actions aimed to evoke the tension of being caught between one's Palestinian ethnicity and Western nationality. Through gestures of sudden tension, pauses, transitions, and using paint to create a visual for these identities, the emotional experience of diasporic individuals was embodied. The painted body served as a visual metaphor, layering physical marks that represented moments of connection, disconnection, strength, and vulnerability. This art-in-motion performance mirrored the shifting, fragmented nature of identity, reflecting the emotional turmoil and internal conflict I felt throughout my research process.

Poetry, as the second component of this piece, was crucial in expressing the emotional weight of the findings. Through poetry, a raw, introspective look at the struggle of identity expression, the tension between the Canadian nationality and Palestinian ethnicity, and the internal battle of privilege and guilt was able to be provided. The spoken word aspect allowed for the emotion and personal narrative within the findings to be compellingly conveyed, creating a performance that would invite others to experience these emotions alongside the visual piece. The act of vocally performing the poem added an element of

vulnerability and authenticity to the experience, making it clear that this project was both personal and universal in its themes.

The link below holds the final version of my final arts-based research project. Here, I perform the art-in-motion piece, recite the poem I wrote—which can also be found below—and thoroughly explain the significance of the elements within the project. This video mostly focuses on the 3 main findings that I came across, as well as presenting the emotions that arose within me, throughout the data collection and thematic analysis process of this project. These main findings were a) the conflict I discovered that I have between my Canadian nationality and my Palestinian ethnicity, b) the struggle I have with comparing my lived experiences as an individual of Palestinian living in the West with individuals of Palestinian descent living in Palestine during the genocide and how this makes me question if I have the right to express my Palestinian identity, and c) the privilege and opportunity that comes with being an individual of Palestinian descent living in the West that can be used for the better. Additionally, in this video, I present the arts-based portion of this research project and how the elements within this piece connect to and represent the findings I uncovered within the data analysis of this project themselves.

### **The Palestine Within**

I'm not sure why I'm feeling such immense chagrin,  
I just can't help thinking about where Palestine lies within.  
My body is not broken, there's no rubble at my feet,  
I've never had to starve to death while the IDF eats meat.  
I've never had to face the miseries of genocide,  
Yet I exclaim my tormented identity into the world with pride.  
Am I really one in the same as the people of Palestine?  
We may share blood and skin and race, but not these desperate  
times.  
We are the same in nature, but not one of the same.

I roam a world of peace, while they roam a world of pain.  
I feel I am not worthy of saying we're akin.  
I feel as though I want to rip my body from my skin.  
As they scream at night in terror, while I watch from a screen,  
I grieve and mourn and ache, while I'm complicit in this scene.  
I reside in a nation, in which my race is dehumanized,  
Where the leaders and the government fund my ancestry's demise.  
The country I grew up in has destroyed my family's land.  
My ethnicity is being eradicated, and my nation is at hand.  
I can't call myself Canadian, as my nation is in oblivion.  
But I haven't gone through the same experiences as other  
Palestinians.  
My ancestry and nationality are left to riot, strife, and brawl,  
While my soul is left to grapple with the madness of it all.  
Though we are vocal, we are loud, and our struggle has gathered  
crowds  
Our presence is rejected; our voices remain ploughed.  
Our protests may serve to no avail, but still, we will prevail.  
Though they may destroy Palestine, they left out one small detail.  
Despite us living in the West, we still share DNA.  
Even if they exterminate the rest of us in a land far, far away.  
The nature of our presence is a form of resistance in the least.  
We can resist colonization in places other than the Middle East.  
Those of us with families who were displaced long, long ago,  
We hold a kind of privilege our kinfolk will never know.  
Though we still face discrimination from some in our society,  
We are not hateful people; that's just the nature of our ethnicity.

We may be racialized across the world from land to sea,  
However, we'll make sure we are not just a memory.  
Oceans, language, and borders may separate us all  
But we'll always fight for resistance, even if we have to crawl.  
Those who lack simple empathy, who choose to uphold this  
prejudice  
Will not ignore the lives they've hurt once we have sought our  
justice.  
Palestinians are dying, while people watch, and the world just spins  
Children who look just like me lay mangled, their bodies piled in  
bins.  
Racism and ashes seem to be akin,  
While everyone I see online continues to bear grins.  
Though I am connected to this Western sin,  
I just don't seem to understand how the world isn't also worn thin.  
I now know why I'm feeling such immense chagrin,  
Yet I still can't help but wonder where Palestine lies within.

## **Discussion**

As this project allowed me to dive into the emotional, psychological, and sociopolitical implications of living as an individual of Palestinian descent in the West during a time where this ethnic community is facing increased violence and genocide in Palestine, the findings I was able to discover within the social media content I analyzed were complex and multifaceted. The data I collected and analyzed brought to light themes of identity, belonging, privilege, and the complexities of navigating cultural, ethnic, and national conflicts.

One key observation I made pertaining to the actual content regarding the ongoing genocide in Palestine within the social media platforms of TikTok and Instagram was the high degree of media fragmentation. The results and varying perspectives towards the genocide varied highly depending on the words I input into the search bar. For example, when I input the word “Palestine” or “Genocide” into the search bar, the algorithm often generated pieces of media content that showcased support for Palestinians and recognition that the actions committed by Israel against Palestine were of genocidal nature.

This observation can be seen in the journal entry where I wrote:

*“Francesca Albanese compared the current ongoing genocide in Palestine to the genocides in Europe against individuals of Jewish descent, in Rwanda against individuals a part of the Tutsi Ethnic group and the genocide committed against the Bosnians”. For context, I came across this video on my feed on the social media platform of TikTok when the search bar input was “Palestine Genocide”.*

On the other hand, when inputting the word “Israel” or “Conflict” into the search bar, the algorithm generated pieces of content that were in support of or justified Israel’s implementation of the genocide upon Palestinians and who believed that the genocide was truly a war, despite Palestinians not having the resources to fight back.

This observation can be noted in my journal entry, which reads as follows:

*“Watching videos like this one is what makes me lose hope and feel anger towards the West and my Western identity. This article, that is coming from a Western news outlet, is framing Palestinians in a*

*way that aims at dehumanizing Palestinian civilians and upholds the gruesome actions committed by the government of Israel. Not only do they say that the government of Israel is fighting in their "own territory", but also, they focus on Hamas rather than the civilians of Palestine, and they are calling this a war when really it is a genocide. They also fail to recognize the fact that Israel has been forcefully occupying and discriminating against the people of Palestine since 1948."*

I believe that this finding speaks to the impact that social media content has within shaping our perceptions of global sociopolitical issues, and that the fragmented nature of social media platforms may present itself as a widespread issue, as it frames these issues in ways that aim to uphold the social media users' internal biases. If I hadn't changed the key words I input into the search bar, I would have only reflected on media content that upheld my internal biases of supporting Palestine, thus limiting the varying perspectives of this issue that I would have consumed. This would have impacted the range of elements that I would have come across and would have limited the amount of popular media content I would have consumed, changing the unbiased, non-directional facet of social media platforms that I wanted to recreate.

One of the principal findings that I discovered in this project was the internal conflict between my Canadian identity and my Palestinian ethnicity. This conflict was significant as it reflected a broader internal struggle faced by many diaspora communities, particularly those whose native countries are in zones of conflict. It allowed me to uncover the tension between ancestral identities and the identity that comes with the individual's current nationality, which often manifests feelings of confusion, shame, guilt, and isolation. This finding emphasizes the way not only individuals of Palestinian descent, but also of other individuals from diaspora communities living in the West, face emotional complexities pertaining to their identities as they feel torn between their ancestry and the privileges they receive as North American citizens. Further, this also presented itself as a conflict because through this research process, I



understood that the country I currently live in supports the dehumanization and genocide of people who share my ethnic background, which made me question my connection to both of my identities.

This finding connects to the research question as it shows that the way that Palestinian suffering and violence is portrayed within social media can evoke conflicting emotions for those of Palestinian descent in the West, confronting them with images of violence and displacement that challenge the privileges they enjoy in more stable countries. This media content allowed feelings of guilt, alienation, and a sense of being torn between solidarity with my ancestral land and the comfort of life in the West to be amplified. This shows the way in which social media plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals of Palestinian descent in the West perceive not only their Palestinian identities, but also their Western identities amid the ongoing genocide, as it allowed me to further understand the conflict between my nationality and my ethnicity regarding the expression of my individual identity.

Secondly, another finding I uncovered was the struggle of whether I have the right to express my Palestinian identity as an individual of Palestinian descent but doesn't have the same lived experiences as other Palestinians during this genocide. This finding showed the way in which members of diasporic communities may feel disconnected from the struggles their families are facing, causing them to question their validity as true representatives of that identity. This can be seen as throughout the journal entries I wrote, there were many points where I questioned whether I was "Palestinian enough" because I felt immense guilt and shame due to me not experiencing this genocide in the same way that other Palestinians are. This finding allowed me to analyze the pressure individuals in diaspora communities may feel to prove their connection to their ethnicity during times of crisis. This internal conflict is captured in one journal entry where I wrote: "Thinking about the individuals trapped underneath the rubble, the children who have lost their lives, and those who have been torn apart from their families, makes me question my ability to even express my embodiment of the Palestinian identity, when I have such a different lived experience as a Palestinian living in the West, than as a Palestinian living in Palestine."

This reflection illustrates the internal struggle experienced by individuals of Palestinian descent, where they find themselves questioning their membership within the Palestinian community while battling

feelings of empathy and guilt, ultimately shedding light on the pressures they face to assert their connection to their ethnicity during times of crisis.

To connect this finding to the research question, this shows that social media plays a significant role in expanding this emotional complexity, as the constant stream of graphic images and narratives from individuals living in Palestine often amplifies the pressure individuals living in the West feel to prove their connection to their ethnic roots during a time where their community faces a crisis. This dynamic reveals how social media not only shapes the broader narrative around Palestinian suffering but also influences the ways individuals in the diaspora perceive their own identities, navigating feelings of guilt, responsibility, and solidarity.

The third key finding uncovered within this research project was the privilege individuals of Palestinian descent living in the West possess and the responsibility it carries in the form of resistance beyond boundaries in the context of the ongoing genocide in Palestine. While social media exposes the horrific realities of this genocide, those of Palestinian descent in the West may struggle with feelings of guilt and hopelessness for not directly experiencing the violence their families face. Though this awareness of unequal privilege evokes feelings of anger and confusion, it also opens up a space for agency. Having the opportunity to live in the West provides us with access to platforms and opportunities that may be used to amplify Palestinian voices and advocate for justice. Though social media often reflects a narrative of victim blaming or victimhood, it also allows individuals in the diaspora to use their privileged position as a tool for resistance and solidarity. This shifts the conversation from guilt to action, highlighting that resistance is not confined to those living within the geographic boundaries of Palestine. Instead, it emphasizes the idea that Palestinians living in the West can—and must—continue to resist colonization and fight for justice, even from afar. This relates back to the research question as it shows that during times of crisis, social media can play a significant role in shaping individuals' apprehension of the role and responsibility that comes with their identity. Further, this shows the way that social media can become a powerful means of connecting global solidarity movements, enabling diaspora communities to actively engage in activism, challenge dominant narratives, and assert their identities in the face of crisis.

## Conclusion

The emotional response I had after consuming social media content depicting the ongoing genocide in Palestine speaks to a broader truth about the impact that media content can have on individuals and communities that are directly or culturally connected to this genocide. I believe that the feelings of chagrin, anger, shame, confusion, guilt, and helplessness I describe and portray within the arts-based portion of this project reflect the struggle of being emotionally connected to a distant but deeply personal crisis. This issue is crucial because it emphasizes the emotional burden faced by people who experience tragedies through a filtered perspective. It demonstrates how the digital world can make distant suffering seem more immediate, while simultaneously producing emotional overload and a sense of helplessness.

This project explores the complexities of Palestinian identity in the West, challenging the traditional view of diaspora communities as disconnected from their homeland or advocacy bridges. Social media plays a pivotal role in this process, both as a platform for activism and a space for emotional and psychological stress. The portrayal of suffering on social media amplifies feelings of guilt, alienation, and moral responsibility for those living in the West. This project highlights the power of the diaspora to engage in activism even from afar, while also framing geopolitical conflicts and influencing emotional responses.

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