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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

This issue is special in that it marks the 20th anniversary of *The Wagner Forum for Undergraduate Research*. An interdisciplinary journal, it showcases the scholarship and intellectual pursuits being explored by students at Wagner College. Papers are reviewed with respect to their intellectual merit and scope of contribution to a given field. To enhance readability the journal is subdivided into three sections entitled *The Natural Sciences and Quantitative Analysis*, *The Social Sciences*, and *Critical Essays*. The first two of these sections are limited to papers and abstracts dealing with scientific inquiries, business research, clinical investigations and the use of mathematical/statistical modeling. The third section is reserved for speculative papers based on the scholarly review and critical examination of previous works.

Read on and enjoy!

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Section I: The Natural Sciences & Quantitative Analysis

Analysis of College Stress Metrics

Jessica Vincello (Business Administration)¹

Small, private, not-for-profit liberal arts colleges have seen an increase in their rate of closure since the beginning of the 21st century. Many experts, from the federal government to higher education scholars, have attempted to develop metrics that determine what is causing these institutions to close their doors. Unfortunately, the nuanced nature of the higher education landscape has resulted in metrics that fall short of their goal. The purpose of this study is to analyze metrics available to higher education administrators and determine which variables provide the best overall picture of an institution's closure risk. Results from calculating and comparing three separate metrics show that, while enrollment characteristics play a role in determining closure risk, metrics which analyze a variety of financial data create a better overall picture for administrators. This research can be expanded upon in the future through the collection and analysis of data for institutions that have closed since 2000 to better understand the predictive efficacy of these metrics.

I. Introduction

COVID-19 has caused many higher education administrators to fear for their institutions' fiscal health. Stay-at-home orders and state-wide lockdowns have forced students to remain online and colleges to invest in increased safety measure, stretching tight budgets even further. Although it is too early to know how the novel coronavirus may impact institutions of higher education, the fear that these administrators face is rooted in nearly two decades of precipitous closures for colleges across the nation. In particular, small, not-for-profit liberal arts schools have faced the brunt of declining student populations and a reliance on tuition discounting. This thesis will explore the factors that contribute to college closure risk and the ways in which federal authorities and private researchers have attempted to quantify these factors. Insight into the effectiveness of these various metrics will be beneficial for both higher education administrators looking to mitigate problems before they arise and prospective students hoping to gain better insight into their educational prospects.

¹ Written under the direction of Dr. Shani Carter in partial fulfillment of the Senior Program requirements.

II. Literature review

Background on College Closures

Over the past two decades, the higher education marketplace has been disrupted by innovations in online education and a move toward vocationalization (Zemsky et. al., 2020). As a result, between 2000 and 2014, four-year colleges closed at a rate of five institutions per year, while mergers occurred at an average rate of two or three annually (Gephardt et. al., 2015).

Since 2014, these rates have continued to rise. The five-year period, from 2014-2019, saw over 1,200 campuses close across the United States, leaving 500,000 students scrambling to finish their degrees (Vasquez & Bauman, 2019). In 2016, closures reached a peak of 448 institutions in one year (Vasquez & Bauman, 2019). Although mass closures are not inevitable, experts state that these rates will continue to rise as institutions run out of money and are forced to close or merge with more sustainable colleges and universities (Zemsky et. al., 2020). These predictions are rooted in a rising number of institutions that display distress signs, including under-enrollment and underfunding from the federal government (Zemsky et. al., 2020).

Although closures have occurred across the higher education sector, institutions with certain characteristics are more significantly impacted than others. Colleges with high levels of underserved populations are more likely to close than their counterparts; enrollment at closed institutions since 2014 consisted of nearly 70% Pell Grant students and 57% Black and Hispanic populations (Vasquez & Berman, 2019).

Underserved populations are most impacted by college closures because they are often students at private, for-profit colleges and universities, which are closing at much higher rates than their peers (Vasquez & Bauman, 2019; Colston et. al., 2020). Since 2014, 88% of the over 1,200 institutions that closed were for-profit colleges (Vasquez & Bauman, 2019). Although these institutions only make up one-tenth of the higher education market, they account for 85% of students impacted by college closures (Vasquez & Bauman, 2019).

There is a lot of debate about why these institutions are more likely to close than their not-for-profit counterparts. In recent years, the loudest voices on the topic place blame on the Obama administration (Vasquez & Bauman, 2019). From 2008-2016, President Barack Obama and his administration placed stricter rules on for-profit colleges to protect the underserved populations that make up a majority of their student bodies (Vasquez & Bauman, 2019). As a result of these increased restrictions, for-profit institutions had trouble meeting federal expectations, and many were forced to close their doors (Vasquez & Bauman, 2019).

While for-profit institutions have closed at the highest rate in the recent past, small, not-for-profit liberal arts institutions face the most uncertain future. These colleges and universities are concentrated in the northeast region of the United States, specifically in the six states that make up the New England territory (Eide, 2018; Levine, 2011). With the highest ratio of colleges to college-age population, institutions in this region are competing with one another for a population of undergraduate students that is on the decline (Levine, 2011). Studies predict that, by 2030, 10 states in the Northeast and Midwest will see high-school graduate populations decline by at least 20 percent, in-line with research conducted after the Great Recession (Eide, 2018; Larkin & Jung, 2019).

Curriculum is also stifling these institutions and their ability to recruit new students. Liberal arts education has become less appealing over the last several decades; as prospective undergraduates focus on earning a degree that will guarantee them a job after graduating, the promise of a well-rounded liberal arts education no longer garners student interest as it once did (Marcus, 2019). This shift in student preferences has hurt small liberal arts schools, which often do not have the resources to reinvest in degree programs that would appeal to these populations (Gephardt et. al., 2015). Additionally, place-bound students, historically drawn to the small institutions close to their homes, are now better served by online education opportunities (Gephardt et. al., 2015). These factors have driven up enrollment at large institutions which have key advantages across the board over their small, liberal arts counterparts (Gephardt et. al., 2015).

Despite these rising rates, closing is not inevitable. Many at-risk colleges have invested in innovative remedies to keep their doors open. The trend within the sector has been to shift to one of several business models that have proved successful for former at-risk colleges and universities. For example, the *distinctive program model* leads an institution to create a shared student experience for all individuals in all programs (Marcy, 2017). Each student is required to participate in experiences that enrich their education, such as study-abroad or internship opportunities, and all students are supported in the pursuit of a shared learning objective (Marcy, 2017).

A more popular model is the *expansion and separation model*, which drives leaders to add “high-demand programs” while diversifying the ways in which programs are offered in order to break into new markets (Marcy, 2017). Small schools have been particularly drawn to this option; Delaware Valley University, for instance, has added summer camps and classes for retired individuals to its offerings in order to supplement its declining population of traditional students (Wong, 2019).

Unfortunately, even if success is achieved through these changes, colleges may create new problems for themselves. Equity at the institution is reduced when need-based aid is reduced, and faculty members may vehemently oppose curriculum changes,

causing them to seek employment elsewhere (Wong, 2019). By shifting focus to these new strategies, campus leaders can lose sight of the college's mission, which causes students to leave as the quality of their existing program is threatened (Marcy, 2017).

Additionally, some schools are slow to recognize or react to their shortcomings, and by the time an at-risk college recognizes it is in danger and rolls out new programs, it is often too late. As enrollment rates decline, the available money for investment falls rapidly, and the ability of the college to compete, especially with larger institutions, is lost (Wong, 2019). Consequently, colleges may overspend and ultimately cause their own demise.

Predictive Metrics

For many decades, scholars and academics have been working to develop metrics that will help colleges and the public determine an institution's risk of closure. It has been claimed that large universities would cease to exist by 2027, and there would be a 50 percent decrease in the number of institutions of higher education by 2026 (Carlson, 2020). While these doomsday predictions have not proven to be true yet, it is clear that the rate at which colleges are closing is increasing. As a result, several metrics have been developed to help colleges and aspiring students determine the health of an institution, even as the higher education community has shunned the efforts.

Examples of Predictive Metrics

In 2003, the Higher Education Act of 1965 was amended to include a new provision that requires colleges and universities in the United States to submit their financial statements to the Department of Education (DOE) (Federal Student Aid, 2020). The statements are used by the DOE to determine the level of financial responsibility a higher education institution is demonstrating. A label of "financially responsible" allows colleges to continue to participate in Title IV programs, which include the distribution of federal financial aid to students (Federal Student Aid, 2020).

When analyzing these statements, the DOE looks at three ratios that judge solely the financial health of an institution, and do not take educational quality into account (Federal Student Aid, 2020). The three ratios used to do this are: (1) the primary reserve ratio, which measures a school's viability and liquidity; (2) the equity ratio, which demonstrates a school's ability to borrow, and; (3) the net income ratio, which measures a school's profitability (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). These ratios are then converted into strength factor scores (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Strength factor scores demonstrate an institution's ability to upgrade their technology, replace physical capital, effectively maintain their human capital, and develop new programs for

students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The scores are then weighted to demonstrate how they most impact the private, non-profit college sector, and the weighted calculations are summed together to create a composite score (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). These scores, which range from -1.0 to 1.5, change each year (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Once an institution falls below a certain composite score threshold, and fails to meet other federal financial criteria, the DOE requires that the school receive “heightened cash monitoring” status and lose the ability to participate in Title IV programs (Federal Student Aid, 2020).

Criticism of the Federal Composite Score has been pervasive since its introduction. Many critics claim that the focus on cash is ineffective because it is easy for institutions to “game” the system (Seltzer, 2020). In addition, the Federal Composite Score’s emphasis on exclusively financial data does not account for the variety of other factors that may contribute to a college’s ability to remain open (Seltzer, 2020; Colston et. al., 2020). Instead, critics propose that the metric be recalibrated in a way that accounts for risk events that are not captured on audits, allowing students and their families to feel more secure in their chosen institution’s financial health (Colston et. al., 2020).

The most controversial metric developed in recent years is that of the Boston-based start-up Edmit, a college advising company that works with students and their families to educate them on their college decisions in the same way one would receive advice when making an investment (Stripling, 2019; Fain, 2019). Founded by Sabrina Manville, the former associate vice president for marketing at Southern New Hampshire University, and Nick Ducoff, the company developed a formula that determined how many years colleges and universities have remaining before their net expenses exceed their net assets and they are forced to close (Fain, 2019). The metric gained attention in 2019 when, together with Inside Higher Education, an industry publication, Edmit planned to publish a list of 946 colleges and their predicted time to closure as determined by its formula (Fain, 2019).

Edmit’s metric compares assets and revenues to expenses using the following variables: (1) the college’s investment returns on funds in its endowment; (2) the salaries of college employees; (3) the college’s tuition; and (4) the college’s tuition discount rate (Carlson, 2020; Fain, 2019). The formula has been used to predict how long 946 colleges have left before they exhaust their assets (Fain, 2019). The model has been adjusted to account for the difficulties that colleges and universities face because of COVID-19, causing the number of high-risk institutions to increase by 47 percent, increasing the number of colleges at-risk of closing in six years to 345 (Seltzer, 2020).

In order to help college administrators better understand the closure risk of their particular institution, Robert Zemsky, Susan Shaman, and Susan Campbell Baldrige developed the Market Stress Test Score (Zemsky et. al., 2020). Development of the metric began with the market structure created by Zemsky and Shaman in their work, *The Market Imperative* (Zemsky et. al., 2020). Since then, it has been developed into a series of calculations used to estimate the viability of undergraduate institutions in four categories using data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) (Zemsky et. al., 2020).

The Market Stress Test Score was formulated to account for differences between two-year and four-year institutions, private and public institutions, and not-for-profit and for-profit institutions (Zemsky et. al., 2020). The Four-Year, Private, Not-for-Profit score consists of four components in two broad categories. First, the Market Stress Test Score looks at enrollment factors, which measure a college's ability to build a sustainable first-year undergraduate class and retain that class into their second year at the institution (Zemsky et. al., 2020). The second category consists of financial measures, which demonstrate an institution's income stability and expense control (Zemsky et. al., 2020). Included in this category are market price, which is the inverse measure of tuition discount rate, and the college's endowment-to-expense ratio (Zemsky et. al., 2020). After analyzing each of these factors, an institution receives a score between 0 to 12 (Zemsky et. al., 2020). Each individual factor can contribute up to three points to the final score; one point in each category is awarded for reaching an alert value, one is awarded for reaching a warning value, and one is awarded for trending toward the alert value three years after the final fiscal year included in the analysis (Zemsky et. al., 2020).

Although over 60% of the four-year, private, not-for-profit colleges studied in *The College Stress Test* displayed only minimal risk, the authors found some daunting statistics (Zemsky et. al., 2020). Four-year, private, not-for-profits faced enrollment decreases at greater rates than their public peers; 15% of private institutions lost over 25% of their population, as compared to 9% for publics (Zemsky et. al., 2020). Additionally, smaller schools faced greater closure risk. Institutions with fewer than 500 undergraduate students were more than twice as likely to exhibit high risk than their counterparts with over 5,000 students (Zemsky et. al., 2020).

Another privately crafted metric comes from Forbes, a business magazine and media company. Each summer, Forbes publishes a list of financial grades for four-year, private, not-for-profit colleges with enrollments of 500 or higher (Schifrin, 2016). The goal of Forbes' team is to help prospective students and their families understand the financial position of the colleges that they are considering for undergraduate studies (Schifrin, 2016).

Although stakeholders would normally look to tuition rates as an indicator of a school's financial health, Forbes warns that schools at high financial risk often keep their sticker prices high while offering steep discounts to students to encourage them to attend (Schifrin, 2016). Discounts such as these can force schools to cut back on facilities, maintenance, tenured professors, and instruction-related expenses, causing students to have poor experiences at the school once they are enrolled (Schifrin, 2016). In the worst-case scenario, Forbes warns that not knowing a school's level of risk can leave students and their families stranded when the institution suddenly goes out of business (Schifrin, 2016).

In order to provide students and families with some transparency around college financial risk, Forbes developed a risk metric. This metric consists of nine variables in three categories: (1) balance sheet strength; (2) operational soundness, and; (3) other higher education specific health indicators (Schifrin, 2016). Unlike other private metrics, Forbes weighs each of its variables differently to allow important factors to contribute more to the overall score of the institution. For example, "tuition as a percentage of core revs" accounts for 15% of a college's final score because tuition discounting can cause schools to restructure their budgets and lay off employees (Schifrin, 2016). In order to calculate these variables, Forbes relies upon publicly available data from the U.S. Department of Education (Schifrin, 2016).

The final scores granted by Forbes range from an A+ to a D (Schifrin, 2016). Colleges that receive a B or higher are considered excellent value for students and families by the Forbes team (Schifrin, 2016). Nearly half of schools, however, receive a score of C or lower, indicating that the institutions are carrying a significant amount of risk (Schifrin, 2016).

Controversy Over Predictive Methods

As predictive metrics for at-risk colleges have gained traction, opposition to their methods has grown, especially among college and university administrators. Some industry leaders, including the senior director of accounting policy at the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), have spoken out directly against the methods, claiming that they are ineffective and incapable of accomplishing what they set out to do (Seltzer, 2019). Most higher education professionals, however, are less opposed to the metrics; instead, the greatest opposition centers on the use of outdated data and the publication of information that could cause enrollment to plummet and lead to the demise of an institution that might otherwise be saved.

Many critics of predictive metrics point out that the data used to classify institutions as “at-risk” is outdated and does not display the full picture of the institution’s health and development. This argument is most often applied to metrics that rely upon data from the IPEDS database. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is a collection of data compiled annually by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In 2003, the Higher Education Act was amended and began requiring all institutions of higher education that receive federal student financial aid to report on a series of data points via several interrelated surveys each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). This data is then published on the NCES website and is often used by private researchers when they develop metrics to measure college closure risk. In spite of the data’s unbiased sourcing and public availability, its publication often lags, leaving researchers to draw conclusions based on outdated financial measures. Further, critics emphasize that raw data alone cannot capture the nuanced practices of struggling institutions, practices which may do more to keep the institutions open than any financial growth could (Seltzer, 2019).

Current data is not the only point of contention for higher education professionals. Even if governments, researchers, or private corporations could develop a reliable and valid metric, many professionals would not want the information disseminated to the public, a point they made clear to Edmit and its co-founders in late 2019. When Edmit first developed its metric, its founders made it clear that its goal was not to scrutinize institutions, but to empower students and their families in their college decision-making process (Fain, 2019). Many students “mortgage their futures by taking out student loans,” and Edmit’s cofounders want to ensure that students do not invest in a failing institution that is unable to educate them properly (Seltzer, 2019). Despite this, several of the colleges included in Edmit’s “doomsday list” threatened to sue Edmit if the data were published (Carlson, 2020; Stripling, 2019).

The level of transparency proposed by Edmit worries many leaders in higher education. Predicting a college’s demise prematurely can be a self-fulfilling prophecy that dooms the institution to closure (Seltzer, 2020). Students are likely to avoid schools with poor scores for fear that they will lose money and have their degree cheapened (Fain, 2019). Many institutions would prefer to use the metrics to get back on track through a strategy change or alumni engagement initiatives (Seltzer, 2019).

Individual Factors that Contribute to Closure

The higher education landscape is incredibly diverse. Institutions serve various populations in a number of ways, offering two-year or four-year educations and for-profit

and not-for-profit models. As a result of this, there are many factors that contribute to the increasing rate of college closures. In recent years, the free-tuition movement has become a major part of these factors (Eide, 2018). Public institutions have received a surge of support from politicians and the public at the prospect of free, or significantly less expensive, college tuition (Eide, 2018). If these promises pull upper middle-class students to public institutions, private colleges will face the brunt of enrollment declines, leading to precipitous college closures that decrease the overall educational diversity of the nation (Eide, 2018).

The effectiveness of college trustees has also been called into question. Despite handling over \$1 trillion dollars in operations for America's colleges and universities, only 10% of trustees have professional experience in higher education (Mitchell, 2019). As a result, inefficient leadership begins at the top of these organizations. Trustees often meddle in admissions decisions and personnel matters, which take resources away from the institution's academic mission and priorities (Mitchell, 2019). If a trusting partnership is not established between the trustees and the college's leadership, stakeholders can make fatal financial decisions that move institutions closer to failure at a rapid rate (Mitchell, 2019).

Most Prevalent Factors

College closures are a nuanced issue. While there are many factors that contribute to small colleges closing their doors, two trends have emerged as major contributors to the closure crisis. As demand for college education has declined among 18- to 22-year olds, the need to discount tuition by ever-larger amounts has created instability for small, private, four-year colleges (Behaunek & Gansemer-Topf, 2019)

Across the higher education landscape, institutions have endured declining student populations for the last decade. In 2019, enrollment was down by 2.1 million students across the sector (Marcus, 2019). Over the course of just one year, from 2018-2019, the number of college students decreased by 250,000 nationwide, according to data collected by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (Nadworny, 2019). This decline has been attributed to the economic improvements that began in 2011, following the major American recession in 2008 (Marcus, 2019). Economic prosperity pulls college-aged students out of the education pipeline, instead leading them directly into the workforce (Marcus, 2019).

Birth rates have also impacted the college student population. Families are having fewer children, on average, than they were 20 years ago, and projections show that this decline in birth rates will continue into the next several decades (Nadworny, 2019).

Although the entire sector has been impacted by this shift, it has disproportionately impacted small institutions (Reynolds et. al., 2016). Over 40% of higher education institutions across America have 1,000 or fewer students, and these institutions have seen an enrollment decrease greater than 5% in the last decade (Reynolds et. al., 2016). Students are being drawn to larger institutions that are physically closer to their homes (Eide, 2018), and have greater access to resources that prospective undergraduates find appealing (Gephardt et. al., 2015). These resources are both financial, including reinvestment in growing academic programs, and human, including larger pools of alumni to draw from when networking (Gephardt et. al., 2015).

Higher education experts, however, do not believe that smaller colleges need to struggle with enrollment as they have been. Instead, these institutions can expand beyond the traditional market of undergraduates that has historically made up their population. Two new markets have emerged as potential solutions to declining enrollment: first-generation college students and adults returning to college (Nadworny, 2019). First-generation college students, largely from Hispanic populations, are projected to contribute most to any future increase in college enrollment over the next several years (Nadworny, 2019). In addition, 36 million adults across America have some college education, but no degree to show for it (Nadworny, 2019). For institutions located where birthrates are declining, this market is lucrative, as these adults are often more prevalent than high school students (Nadworny, 2019).

Tuition Discount Rates

Attracting students in a crowded, thinning marketplace has become a struggle for many colleges and universities. As a result, schools have begun discounting their tuitions to make colleges affordable for students and families who cannot, or will not, pay the full cost of attendance (Eide, 2018). Although the sticker price of some colleges has reached a height of \$70,000 in recent years, steep discounts have brought the cost to a more manageable range for prospective students (Eide, 2018). Along with managing costs for families, this practice makes an institution seem like a safer choice for prospective students; helps colleges meet diversity goals; aids in attracting high-quality students; and keeps an institution in-line with peers who are engaging in similar discounting practices (Eide, 2018).

In recent years, however, tuition discount rates have risen to unsustainable levels. Colleges and universities with fewer than 5,000 students rely on tuition for 56% of their annual revenue, which is used to cover the institution's large fixed costs (Reynolds et. al., 2016; Horn, 2018). Despite this reliance on tuition, discounts rose from

38% to 49.9%, nearly half of the sticker price, from 2005 to 2018 (Horn, 2018; Behaunek & Gansemer-Topf, 2019).

Smaller colleges, the institutions most reliant on tuition revenue, have been left with little pricing power and ever-decreasing net tuition per student as a result of these practices (Gephardt et. al., 2015). Schools have been forced to use institutional resources to keep up with the discounting trend, moving them away from professor salaries, facilities maintenance, and the development of new programs (Nadworny, 2019). Continually cutting budgets in these vital categories reduces the institution’s overall quality and efficacy and causes students to look elsewhere for their education (Nadworny, 2019).

III. Hypothesis

H: Including data about student populations (e.g., first-year enrollment and retention) in risk metric calculations will make them more sensitive and give higher education administrators a more well-rounded look at where their institution is holding risk.

IV. Methods

Subjects

In order to assess the effectiveness of predictive metrics in determining a college’s closure risk, the metrics must first be applied to a pool of institutions. After analyzing a variety of literature on college closures, analysis was applied to the group deemed most at-risk of closure within the next two decades: small, liberal arts colleges. To narrow down the pool of possible subjects, the following criteria were applied to the colleges and universities within the IPEDS database, which resulted in a pool of 90 subjects:

Table 1. Criteria for Colleges & Universities Included in Study	
	Criteria
Institution Type	Four-Year, Private, Not-for-Profit
Institution Size	500-2500 Students
Institution Location	New England (i.e. ME, VT, NH, MA, CT, RI) Middle States (i.e. NY, PA, NJ, DE, MD, DC*)
* Although DC is a territory, it is included in the Middle States region by the IPEDS database, and was therefore included in the study.	

Measures

Three measures of potential closure risk were examined, which are summarized Table 2. Following the choice and calculations of these measures, they were then applied to the hypothesis as demonstrated in Table 3.

Data	Variables		
	Administrative Analysis	Federal Analysis	Private Financial Analysis
Instrument	The College Stress Test Metric	Federal Composite Score	College Financial Grades
Data Source	<i>The College Street Test</i> (book)	U.S. Department of Education	Forbes
Type of data gathered	Quantitative	Quantitative	Quantitative
Types of scores produced	Scale of 0 --> 12	Scale of -1.0 --> 3.0	Scale of A+ --> D

Adapted from: Rudestam, K.E. & Newton, R.R. (1992). *Surviving Your Dissertation*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, Inc. page 140.

Hypothesis	Instrument			Variable Relationships	Statistical Test
	Administrative Analysis	Federal Analysis	Creditor Analysis		
H: Including data about student populations (i.e. first-year enrollment and retention) in risk metric calculations will make them more sensitive and give higher education administrators a more well-rounded look at where their institution is holding risk.	The College Stress Test Metric	Federal Composite Score	Bond Ratings	CST > FFG > FCS (in terms of sensitivity)	distribution; histograms

Adapted from: Rudestam, K.E. & Newton, R.R. (1992). *Surviving Your Dissertation*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, Inc. page 138.

The College Stress Test

The College Stress Test includes four components (e.g., first year enrollment) as shown in Table 4. A composite score (range of 0-12) is produced based on a period of eight academic years (Zemsky et al., 2020). The level of risk is as follows: 0-1 = “minimal risk;” 1-4 = “moderate risk;” and 4-12 = “substantial risk,” of closure (Zemsky et al., 2020).

Table 4. Components of The College Stress Test Metric for Four-Year Private Not-for-Profit Institutions

Data	Variables			
	First Year Enrollment	First- to Second-Year Retention Rate	Market Price	Endowment-to-Expense Ratio
Instrument(s)	First-Year Degree-Seeking Undergraduates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time Adjusted Fall 20XX Cohort • Students from Full-time Adjusted Fall 20XX Cohort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published In-State Tuition and Fees 20XX-20XX • Full-time Total • Total Amount of Institutional Grant Aid Awarded to Full-time First-time Undergraduates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value of Endowment Assets at the End of the Fiscal Year • Total Expenses - Total Amount
Data Source	IPEDS Database	IPEDS Database	IPEDS Database	IPEDS Database
Type of data gathered	Quantitative	Quantitative	Quantitative	Quantitative
Types of scores produced	Number of Students	Percentage of Students Retained	Monetary Value in Base Year Dollars	Ratio

Adapted from: Rudestam, K.E. & Newton, R.R. (1992). *Surviving Your Dissertation*. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, Inc. page 140.

Federal Composite Score

The Federal Composite Score is the second metric examined in this study. The Federal Composite Score focuses exclusively on financial data to create a measure of the institution’s overall financial health (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The various components of the metric are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Components of Federal Composite Score

COMPONENT	RATIO	STRENGTH FACTOR SCORE	WEIGHTED SCORE
Primary Reserve	Adjusted Equity / Total Expenses	Ratio * 20	Strength Factor * 30%
Equity	Modified Equity / Modified Expenses	Ratio * 6	Strength Factor * 40%
Net Income	Income Before Taxes / Total Revenues	$1 + (33.33 * \text{Ratio})$	Strength Factor * 30%
FINAL COMPOSITE SCORE			SUM ALL WEIGHTED SCORES

Although these scores are initially calculated to three decimal places, they are rounded to the nearest tenth and are measured on a scale from -1.0 – 3.0. The level of risk is as follows: 1.5 to 3.0 = “financially responsible without further oversight,” 1.0 to 1.4 = “financially responsible,” -1.0 to 0.9 = “not financially responsible” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Forbes College Financial Grades

The final measure examined in this study is the Forbes Financial Grade, which includes enrollment and market price data. Table 6 outlines the various components of Forbes’ Financial Grades and includes the weight given to them in the overall score calculation.

Procedure

The procedure for this study consisted of four main steps: (1) searching for articles; (2) calculating the Market Stress Test Score; (3) gathering the metrics published by the U.S. Department of Education and Forbes; and (4) the comparison of each of these metrics.

Article Searches

The literature search began on July 16, 2020, using the keywords “small college closure” in Google Scholar, EBSCOHost, and Wagner College’s OneSearch databases. Further literature searches were conducted on July 28, 2020 using the same databases;

Table 6. Components of Forbes Financial Grade

COMPONENT	EXPLANATION	FORMULA	WEIGHT	FULL CREDIT VALUE
Endowment Assets Per FTE		Year-End Endowment Assets / Number of 12 Month Full-Time Equivalent Students	15%	\$330,000 per FTE
Primary Reserve Ratio	Can annual expenses be covered by university using "expendable assets?"	(Total Unrestricted Net Assets + Temporarily Restricted Net Assets + Debt Related to Property, Plant, and Equipment - Property, Plant, and Equipment Net of Accumulated Depreciation) / Total Annual Expenses	15%	> 2.5 Years
Viability Ratio	Expendable assets relative to debt load		10%	> 2.5 Years
Core Operating Margin	How well is the college meeting its annual obligations?	Essential (or Core) Revenues for Education - Core Expenses	10%	> 50% ^a
Tuition As a Percentage of Core Revenues	AKA Tuition Dependency Ratio		15%	< 10% ^b
Return on Assets		(Change in Net Assets Over the Year) / Assets at Beginning of Year	10%	Not Available ^c
Admission Yield	Speaks to demand and is an indication of the effectiveness of a schools admissions team in targeting prospects	Average of Last Three Available Years of Data	10%	> 50% ^d
Percent Freshman Getting Institutional Grants			7.50%	< 40% ^e
Instruction Expenses Per FTE	How much funding the particular institution devotes to the core mission of higher education		7.50%	> \$46,000 per FTE ^f

^aHalf Credit Awarded for at Least 10%; ^bHalf Credit Awarded for 50%; ^cHalf Credit for <5%; ^dHalf Credit for 25%; ^eHalf Credit 90%; ^fHalf Credit for \$20,000 per FTE

Schifrin, M. (2017, August 2). *2017 college financial grades: How fit is your school?* <https://www.forbes.com/sites/schifrin/2017/08/02/2017-college-financial-grades-how-fit-is-your-school/?sh=4219a8b97d68>

this process was focused on gathering the source material cited in articles previously read in the preliminary research analysis process. Additional resources were gathered from booksellers and various online platforms, including *Inside Higher Ed*.

Calculation of CST Metric

Using the Market Stress Test framework, scores were calculated for each of the institutions in the subject pool utilizing Microsoft Excel, formulas published by the authors of *The College Stress Test*, and data sourced from the IPEDS database on October 14, 2020 at 12:23 am. Appendix A demonstrates the formulas used to calculate the Market Stress Test Score for each of the 86 institutions with complete data sets.

Gathering of Federal Composite Score

On October 25, 2020 at 10:18 pm, the Federal Composite Scores was collected from the Federal Student Aid (FSA) website. Each of the institutions from the subject pool had their Federal Composite Score extracted from the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet provided by the Department of Education.

Gathering of Forbes College Financial Grades

On November 3, 2020 at 6:33 pm, the Forbes 2017 College Financial Grades were gathered from the Forbes website for all available institutions within the subject pool.

Comparison of Data

In order to analyze the distribution of each metric, histograms were created. The individuals scores for all institutions were entered into Microsoft Excel and tabulated using the histogram chart function within the program.

V. Results

Federal Composite Score Analysis

The Federal Composite Score shows little closure risk for this study's institutional demographic. There were 90 schools with Federal Composite Score data for the 2017-2018 academic year; of those institutions, 87 were deemed financially responsible according to Federal Student Aid (FSA) standards, as shown in figure 1. Although 3 schools required additional federal oversight, none of the institutions were financially irresponsible according to FSA. Analysis of the data shows the distribution of scores (mean score = 10.74 and standard deviation = 1.3425), which demonstrates that the results are heavily skewed toward financial responsibility.

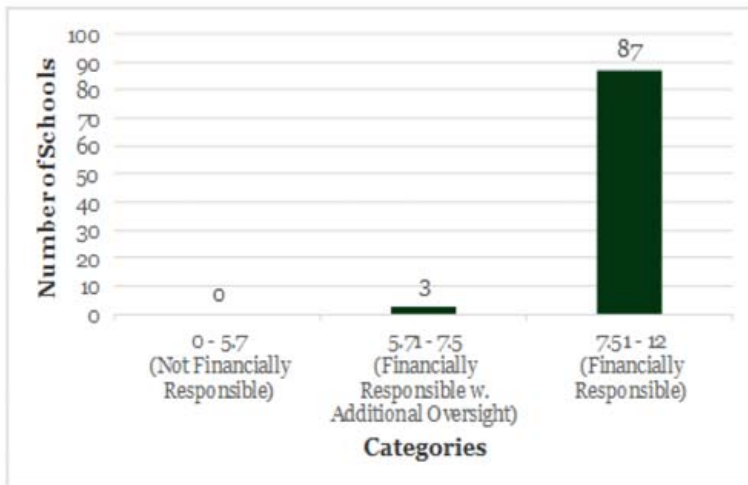


Figure 1: Histogram of Federal Composite Scores

Forbes Financial Grade Analysis

There were 68 institutions within this study's population with Forbes Financial Grades for the 2017 academic year. These institutions demonstrated wide variation in their financial risk; scores ranged from A+ to D, the lowest grade given by the Forbes' team in 2017 (Figure 2). The mean score for this data was 5.02, or a C+, and the standard deviation was 3.4875, resulting in a wide spread of data and a distribution skewed toward moderate riskiness.

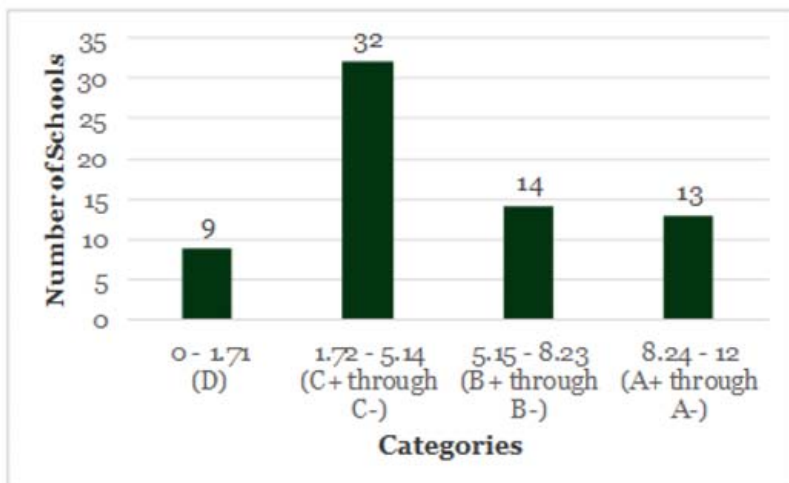


Figure 2: Histogram of Forbes Financial Grades

Market Test Score Analysis

Using the Microsoft Excel table provided by the authors of *The College Stress Test*, Market Stress Test Scores were calculated for 86 institutions with complete data sets in the IPEDS database. As shown in Figure 3, the scores for these schools were concentrated in the moderate risk category; 31 of 86 schools earned moderate risk scores, while 29 were at mild risk and 26 were at substantial risk. The distribution of scores, however, shows a skew towards the lower end of the substantial risk range. With a mean of 2.6628 and a standard deviation of 2.2576, 68% of institutions are likely to score between 0 and 5.

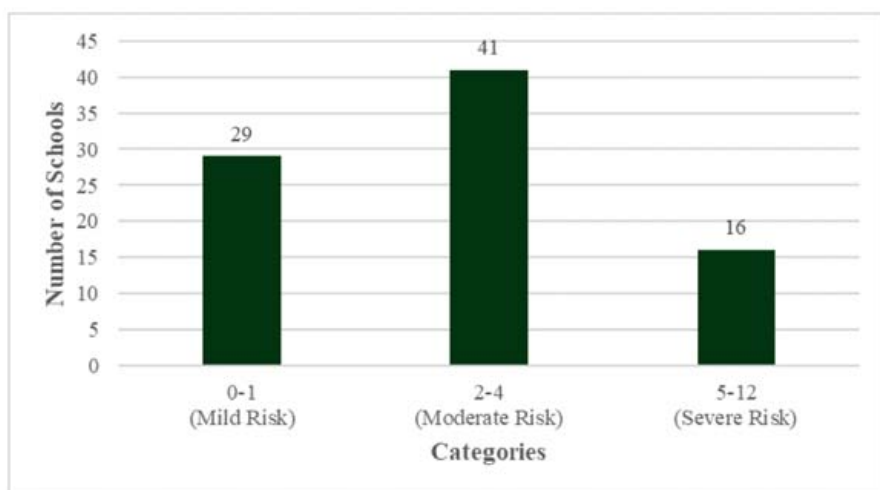


Figure 3: Histogram of Market Stress Test Scores

VI. Discussion

Metrics that Include Student Enrollment Data

This study began with the hypothesis that including data about student populations (e.g. first-year enrollment and retention) in risk metric calculations will make them more sensitive and give higher education administrators a more well-rounded look at where their institution is holding risk. When analyzing the metrics, I compared the level of risk demonstrated by the Market Stress Test Score and the Forbes Financial Grade to the Federal Composite Score for the institution. Because the Federal Composite Score emphasizes cash holdings, it provided a baseline for understanding the impact of non-financial factors on measuring closure risk.

Market Stress Test

The Market Stress Test Score included the most student enrollment data of the three metrics used in this study. It included first-year enrollment changes along with changes in retention rate. For the 86 colleges that had adequate data available in the IPEDS database, the metric was significantly more sensitive than the Federal Composite Score. The number of schools at moderate financial risk (or the federal equivalent) was over 13 times greater when using the Market Stress Test metric than when using the Federal Composite Score. Additionally, 14 institutions were at severe risk according to the Market Test Score despite the federal government not labeling any of these institutions as “not financially responsible.”

Upon further analysis of the individual Market Stress Test factors, however, I found that enrollment statistics were not the major contributing factors to schools having high overall scores (Appendix C). Over 60% of the 86 institutions studied received a score of zero in their first-year and retention categories; only 12.09% and 2.30% of all institutions received the highest score available in those categories, respectively. Although these numbers are not negligible, they fail to demonstrate that decreasing populations of college-aged students in New England and the Middle States have been the major contributing factor to declining college and university financial health.

Contrastingly, the largest contributing factor to a high Market Stress Test Score was falling market price, the inversion of tuition discount rate. Only 50% of schools received a score of 0 in the market price category, while 26.67% of the schools received a full three points. Despite supporting the premise that higher education administrators must consider more than liquidity ratios when trying to determine their institution’s closure risk, high market price scores suggest that including alternative financial metrics in the score calculation may be a better solution to the current lack of information, as opposed to including more student enrollment data.

Forbes Financial Grade

Analysis of the Forbes Financial Grades supports the conclusions drawn above. Unlike the Market Stress Test Score, the Forbes formula only included one enrollment factor: admissions yield. The rest of the factors were financial in nature, but they were less focused on liquidity than the Federal Composite Score; instead, Forbes’ financial factors emphasized operational efficacy, focusing specifically on the relationship between finances and institutional mission. This included a similar measure to the market price factor in the Market Stress Test Score, here called, “tuition as a percentage of core revenues.”

As a result of diversifying the contributing factors and creating a wider range of score categories, Forbes created a more nuanced metric than the Federal Composite or Market Stress Test Scores. When compared to the Federal Composite Score, Forbes' metric placed over 15 times more institutions at moderate risk of closure (a score from B+ to C- on their scale) than did the Federal Composite Score. In addition, Forbes labeled 9 schools as "D" institutions, carrying the most financial risk, as opposed to 0 labeled by the federal government.

Forbes' diversified calculations are what sets it apart from the Market Stress Test Score. In the Market Stress Test calculation, schools that reach a certain threshold for a given factor automatically receive a full point. Administrators, as a result, would be required to dig further into the calculations to determine if that factor has been perpetually on the decline or if their most recent fiscal year had unexpected challenges that would trigger the threshold marker. Forbes' formula, on the other hand, allows for short-term calculations and a wide array of point values that help administrators comprehend the severity of their shortcomings in each of the nine metrics. In doing this, Forbes demonstrates that the efficacy of a risk metric has two dimensions: (1) the types of factors used, and; (2) the ability to easily determine which of the individual factors is contributing to risk and to what degree it does so.

Limitation - Data for Closed Schools

In order to determine the effectiveness of these metrics, this study hoped to analyze scores in all three categories for schools that have closed within the last decade. Unfortunately, the lack of available data was a limitation in accomplishing this goal. By the time colleges closed their doors, the federal government had moved the institutions to the Heightened Cash Monitoring lists, eliminating them from receiving Federal Composite Scores. These schools were also removed from the IPEDS database, which prevented calculation of their Market Stress Test Scores. Furthermore, many of these institutions saw their overall enrollment drop below 500 prior to closing, which moved them outside of the scope of Forbes' Financial Grades. Due to these circumstances, it was beyond the scope of this study to analyze the risk scores of closed institutions.

VII. Conclusions

General Conclusions

Colleges, especially those that rely heavily upon tuition as a part of their operating budget, should consider reducing the amount of aid that they award to incoming students. This, however, is not a perfect solution to the rising levels of risk, as decreasing award amounts is likely to reduce diversity among college populations and

could reduce enrollments further than external conditions already have. However, declining student populations have not weighed as heavily on small, liberal arts colleges as experts believed. Rising numbers of non-traditional students can help mitigate declining high-school graduate populations in areas saturated by small, liberal arts institutions.

Implications for Practice

Development of college risk metrics is a nuanced field. Although many metrics have surfaced from various experts over the past two decades, they are not all effective at giving administrators a clear picture of the risk their institutions carry. Moving forward, metric developers should focus on creating metrics that take enrollment data, liquidity data, and educational success data into account proportionally to their importance to institutions.

Furthermore, administrators should begin analyzing their institutions using these metrics to better understand their risk. While many administrators have lamented about the ever-changing higher education landscape, the problems they face are not inevitable. By utilizing all of the available metrics, which analyze various elements of institutions, administrators can gain headway on problems that will arise in the near future. This will allow them to implement meaningful changes, not limited to altering their admissions procedures to attract non-traditional students more effectively; and reconsidering their business model to offer attractive programs to first-time undergraduates.

Implications for Research

Unfortunately, closed institutions often take with them the data that could explain why their doors closed so suddenly. Future research should be conducted to gather and analyze the data of closed colleges and universities in order to better understand which metrics are most accurate in predicting closure risk. Research can also include which methods of mitigating risk were most effective in saving colleges from closure by taking a longer-term view of the data and utilizing case studies to identify institutions that were brought back from the brink.

As with higher education following the Great Recession of 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have major implications for the higher education sector. Although it is difficult to ascertain what the impact will be, populations will be in flux and tuition discounting may become more important as higher unemployment leaves families with less income. Researchers looking to further analyze institutional closure risk should adjust the metrics they are working with to account for massive changes due to the pandemic that will skew data, especially when taking a long-term look at trends.

VIII. References

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Appendix A: Market Stress Test Calculation Spreadsheet

Counter	Year	First Year	Retention	Market Price in Constant Base Year Dollars	Endowment/Expenses Ratio
1	2010-2011	N	%	\$	Ratio
2	2011-2012	N	%	\$	Ratio
3	2012-2013	N	%	\$	Ratio
4	2013-2014	N	%	\$	Ratio
5	2014-2015	N	%	\$	Ratio
6	2015-2016	N	%	\$	Ratio
7	2016-2017	N	%	\$	Ratio
8	2017-2018	N	%	\$	Ratio
	% change recent vs. base	= $(C9-C2)/C2$	= $(D9-D2)/D2$	= $(E9-E2)/E2$	= $(F9-F2)/F2$
	Slope of line	= $SLOPE(C2:C9,A2:A9)$	= $SLOPE(D2:D9, A2:A9)$	= $SLOPE(E2:E9, A2:A9)$	= $SLOPE(F2:F9,A2:A9)$
	Intercept of Line	= $INTERCEPT(C2:C9,A2:A9)$	= $INTERCEPT(D2:D9, A2:A9)$	= $INTERCEPT(E2:E9, A2:A9)$	= $INTERCEPT(F2:F9,A2:A9)$
	Projected value most recent year +3	= $C12+(11*C11)$	= $D12+(11*D11)$	= $E12+(11*E11)$	= $F12+(11*F11)$
	% change projected year vs. base year	= $(C13-C2)/C2$	= $(D13-D2)/D2$	= $(E13-E2)/E2$	= $(F13-F2)/F2$
	% change recent year vs. base year reaches or falls below alert value	= $IF(C10<C18,1,0)$	= $IF(D9<D18,1,0)$	= $IF(E10<E18,1,0)$	= $IF(F10<F18,1,0)$
	% change recent year vs. base year reaches or falls below warning value	= $IF(C10<C19,1,0)$	= $IF(D9<D19,1,0)$	= $IF(E10<E19,1,0)$	= $IF(F10<F19,1,0)$
	% change projected year vs. base year reaches or falls below alert value	= $IF(C14<C18,1,0)$	= $IF(D13<D18,1,0)$	= $IF(E14<E18,1,0)$	= $IF(F14<F18,1,0)$
	Alert Value	-0.174	0.656	-0.104	0
	Warning Value	-0.308	0.564	-0.175	-0.103
	Component Score	= $C15+C16+C17$	= $D15+D16+D17$	= $E15+E16+E17$	= $F15+F16+F17$
	Total Market Stress Test Score				= $C20+D20+E20+F20$

Zemsky, R., Shaman, S., Baldrige, S.C. (2020). The college stress test: Tracking institutional futures across a crowded market. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Appendix B: Comparison of Metric Scores

UnitID	Institution Name	Market Stress Test Score	Federal Score	Forbes Score	Forbes GPA
128498	Albertus Magnus College	6	2.2	C	2.15
210571	Albright College	3	2.4	C	1.96
210669	Allegheny College	5	2.2	B	2.72
164465	Amherst College	1	3	A+	4.5
164492	Anna Maria College	3	2.7	D	1.24
167792	Bard College at Simon's Rock	3	2.5	N/A	N/A
160977	Bates College	0	3	A+	4.07
230816	Bennington College	3	2.2	C	1.64
183822	Bloomfield College	2	2.7	C	1.61
189413	Boricua College	7	3	N/A	N/A
161004	Bowdoin College	0	3	A+	4.5
211273	Bryn Mawr College	0	3	A+	4.5
183910	Caldwell University	3	2.3	N/A	N/A
211431	Carlow University	0	2.4	C+	2.25
189848	Cazenovia College	9	2.2	C	1.93
211468	Cedar Crest College	0	3	C	1.97
183974	Centenary University	N/A	2.2	N/A	N/A
211583	Chestnut Hill College	1	2.1	D	1.24
161086	Colby College	2	3	A+	4.27
182634	Colby-Sawyer College	4	3	D	1.37
193399	College of Mount Saint Vincent	2	2.5	C	1.66
167394	College of Our Lady of the Elms	4	3	C+	2.27
186618	College of Saint Elizabeth	1	2.8	C-	1.5
160959	College of the Atlantic	3	3	N/A	N/A
190248	Concordia College-New York	3	1.4	D	1.06
128902	Connecticut College	3	2.4	B+	3.24
165574	Dean College	3	3	N/A	N/A
212009	Dickinson College	0	3	A	3.66
190761	Dominican College of Blauvelt	5	1.8	D	1.33
212197	Elizabethtown College	2	3	C	2.12
190983	Elmira College	4	1.6	D	1.3
165671	Emmanuel College	0	2.5	N/A	N/A
184612	Felician University	2	2.7	N/A	N/A

UnitID	Institution Name	Market Stress Test Score	Federal Score	Forbes Score	Forbes GPA
212577	Franklin and Marshall College	1	3	A	3.75
212656	Geneva College	2	2.9	C	2.23
130989	Goldey-Beacom College	3	3	A-	3.4
165936	Gordon College	2	2.4	C	1.66
212805	Grove City College	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
191515	Hamilton College	0	3	A+	4.32
166018	Hampshire College	4	2.4	C+	2.33
191533	Hartwick College	5	2.2	C	2.13
212911	Haverford College	0	3	A+	4.4
166054	Hellenic College-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology	7	2.2	N/A	N/A
191621	Hilbert College	4	2.2	C	1.77
191630	Hobart and William Smith Colleges	1	2.5	B	2.76
162760	Hood College	2	2.9	B	2.51
191676	Houghton College	0	2.2	C	1.97
213251	Juniata College	2	2.4	B-	2.5
247649	Landmark College	N/A	2.4	N/A	N/A
166391	Lasell University	4	2.8	N/A	N/A
213507	Lebanon Valley College	2	2.9	C	1.94
213668	Lycoming College	5	3	A-	3.34
182917	Magdalen College	N/A	2.2	N/A	N/A
213774	Manor College	3	2.7	N/A	N/A
192785	Maria College of Albany	N/A	3	N/A	N/A
192864	Marymount Manhattan College	2	3	D	1.09
129774	Mitchell College	5	3	C-	1.53
214175	Muhlenberg College	0	2.6	B	3.1
167260	Nichols College	3	3	C	1.66
194392	Paul Smiths College of Arts and Science	5	2.4	C	1.85
167455	Pine Manor College	8	1.1	N/A	N/A
194958	Roberts Wesleyan College	1	2.2	C	2.15
215691	Rosemont College	4	2.4	C-	1.5
183239	Saint Anselm College	0	3	B	2.65
215798	Saint Vincent College	0	3	B	2.74
195304	Sarah Lawrence College	0	3	B-	2.43
163976	St. John's College	4	2.4	N/A	N/A

UnitID	Institution Name	Market Stress Test Score	Federal Score	Forbes Score	Forbes GPA
195544	St. Joseph's College-New York	6	3	D	1.41
195243	St. Thomas Aquinas College	4	2.2	C+	2.36
216278	Susquehanna University	3	2.6	B	2.54
216287	Swarthmore College	0	3	A+	4.5
454184	The King's College	3	2.4	C	1.88
216357	Thiel College	7	2.3	C	1.6
161563	Thomas College	2	3	C	1.85
183275	Thomas More College of Liberal Arts	1	1.7	C-	1.44
130590	Trinity College	0	3	A+	4.18
196653	Trocaire College	N/A	3	N/A	N/A
196866	Union College	0	3	N/A	N/A
161572	Unity College	2	3	C	1.97
216524	Ursinus College	1	2.4	B	2.82
197142	Villa Maria College	5	2.3	N/A	N/A
197197	Wagner College	1	3	C	1.71
216667	Washington & Jefferson College	1	2.9	B	2.83
164216	Washington College	3	2.9	B	3.13
216694	Waynesburg University	2	2.3	C	1.92
197230	Wells College	4	2	N/A	N/A
131098	Wesley College	10	1.2	C	1.68
216807	Westminster College	5	2.3	N/A	N/A
168281	Wheaton College	3	2.3	N/A	N/A
168342	Williams College	0	3	A+	4.5
217013	Wilson College	3	2.2	A	3.48

Appendix C: Analysis of MST Factor Scores

Percentage of Schools with Each Individual Factor Score					
Score	First Year Enrollment	Retention Rate	Market Price	Endowment-to-Expense Ratio	
3	12.09%	2.30%	26.67%		11.36%
2	14.29%	6.90%	11.11%		4.55%
1	12.09%	6.90%	12.22%		6.82%
0	61.54%	83.91%	50.00%		77.27%

Section II: The Social Sciences

The COVID Housing Market Comparison

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This paper investigates the correlation between the Federal Funds rate, foreclosure rate, and Housing Price Index of the United States from 2004 to 2020. It investigates whether or not these variables align to show a connection between the 2008 housing market and the 2020 housing market. As well as investigating growth in the market and if the housing market can be understood well enough to provide an opportunity for investment. This thesis offers insight into what caused the 2008 market crash and how the current market is lining up; as well as a look into housing prices within real estate. This research can be expanded and further investigated with the use of more macroeconomic indicators, as well as a further investigation into different forms of real estate profitability.

I. Introduction

With an ever-changing economic climate, knowing where a market is heading is a challenge. While it is impossible to predict, researching factors that directly affect a marketplace can provide indications of where a market is headed. The modern world is facing a crisis unseen before, and while there have been housing market crashes in the past, the volatility of the world at this time is unprecedented. Understanding the market and its factors is integral to knowing if a safe investment can and should be made within it. The insights learned within this paper will be useful for not only a homebuyer or seller, but also a larger player within the market. A better understanding of both the current market and the current world will only help an investor make the right choice surrounding real estate.

II. Literature Review

Housing Market Crash 2008

An economic crisis creates stress, problems, and worry for anyone involved. Individuals are faced with uncertainty regarding many issues, such as if they will have a job, how their government will respond, and how they will pay their bills. All of these

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types of uncertainty indicate the levels of stress involved in living during an economic crisis.

For the economy as a whole, many sectors contribute to the market downfall. Some of the factors that contribute to poor economic conditions include the stock market, employment, inflation, and many other macroeconomic indicators. In the past, in the United States, economic crises were often accompanied by housing market difficulties. No housing market downfall is more prominent than that of 2008. The 2008 housing market crisis provided an enormous opportunity for profit, and is currently being mirrored in a smaller way in the current COVID-19 pandemic-caused economic crisis. While this pandemic is creating struggles for many people, it is also creating opportunities for people who are willing to invest in the housing market, looking to make a profit.

The housing market comprises the supply and demand of a particular location's houses and the prices of the houses (Pettinger, 2018). Local markets are affected by the national economy. The demand side of the market is affected by the country's economic growth; its interest rates; its price and availability of houses; its market speculation; and its mortgage-loan readiness (Pettinger, 2018). The supply side is influenced by fewer factors, including the number of homes for sale, new building projects, and preexisting homes for sale (Pettinger 2018). Figure 1 shows a hypothetical supply and demand scenario for the housing market. In Figure 1, the equilibrium price is \$300,000, which is also known as the fair market price and which occurs where the quantity demanded meets the quantity supplied (Pettinger, 2018). When one of these factors is out of place, the pricing module gets ruptured. In the current market, the demand has been consistent, but the supply seems to be dwindling (Olick, 2020). With the supply dropping, this means that if demand stays the same, the price will increase. This supply decrease is estimated to be a loss of 400,000 homes that would have been listed on the site "Realtor.com" since the pandemic began (Olick, 2020). The reason behind this is simple: the unknown factor of this pandemic is making people not only worry about safety, but future housing prices as well. This demand and supply relationship drastically effects pricing, and money can very easily be lost or gained because of this seemingly simple relationship.

Mortgage Rates

The housing market was once thought to be too well structured to fail, yet it did just that back in 2008 due to the subprime mortgage crisis which lasted until 2010 (Duca, 2013). This crisis directly resulted in 3.1 million houses entering foreclosure in 2008; which was one in every fifty-four homes within the United States (Christie, 2009). The cause of this crisis was poorly structured loans and bonds that allowed individuals who

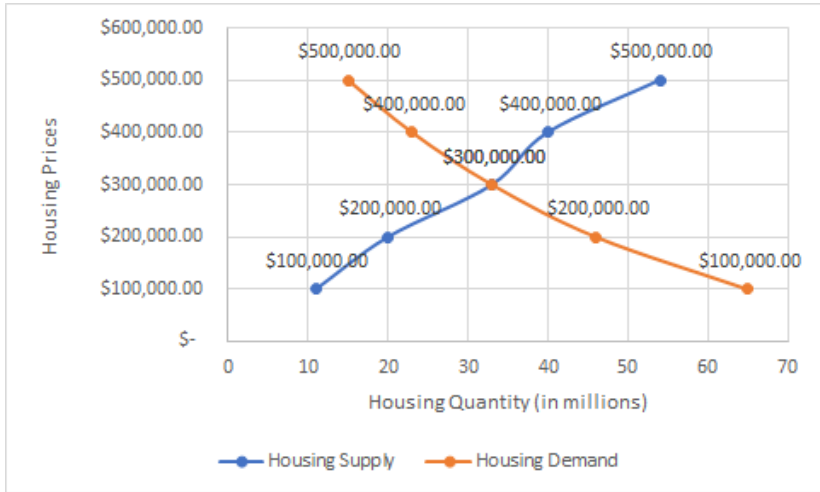


Figure 1: Housing Market Supply and Demand Graph

could not afford to buy a house the ability to do so (Duca, 2013). Typically, purchasing a home requires a down payment, steady income, and a high credit score (Duca, 2013). During the early 2000s, however, lenders began issuing mortgages to borrowers with low credit scores (Duca, 2013), and these loans typically had variable interest rates. Mortgage rates are structured off of the Federal Funds Rate, which is set by the Federal Reserve in an effort to allow for an open market (“Open Market Operations”, 2020). The Federal Reserve has used a variety of rates, depending upon the economic standing within the country, to either stimulate the economy and offer more loans, or slow economic activity with a higher rate (“Open Market Operations”, 2020). In the case of the housing market, a higher Federal Funds Rate means banks borrow money at an increased rate (“Open Market Operations”, 2020). This will therefore increase the mortgage rate that is given to an individual looking to purchase a house.

Private Mortgage-Backed Securities

The mortgages that banks offered in the subprime crisis were bundled together and sold to private investors (Duca, 2013) as private mortgage-backed securities (PMBS). These allowed for a higher number of first-time home-buyers than normal (Duca, 2013). These mortgages were loaned out by institutions that would use PMBS as their funding tool (“Mortgage-Backed Securities”, 2020). Essentially, a bank would give a bundle of these mortgages to an investment bank or other financial institution (“Mortgage-Backed Securities”, 2020). This institution would then use the funding they received from investors to cover the costs of the mortgages they had financed (Brown, 2016). Investors

would see the higher returns associated with these--because of the potentially risky mortgages and because of the potential upside--and would decide to invest (Brown, 2016). The use of PMBS during this time allowed a homeowner with less than optimal credit to obtain a mortgage. The reason was simple, a bank would now be able to supply this individual with a loan because they felt confident that PMBS provided a low-risk option for their investors who were willing to supply the money (Duca, 2013). While PMBS seemed like a steady investment at first, it proved otherwise. During the years preceding the 2008 crash, it is estimated that an additional three trillion dollars were poured into the market because of the subprime mortgages (Wachter & Keys, 2018).

Once housing prices peaked, homeowners had two options. The first was to sell their home for a higher price than they purchased it for. The second was to refinance against a higher market price (Duca, 2013). As housing prices continued their ascent, so did foreclosure rates. It is estimated that the foreclosure rate on a subprime mortgage is five times as high as a normal borrower (Dimartino & Duca, 2007). As this began occurring, the money that was supposed to be in the hands of the banks to pay its investors was no longer present. These private sectors that were responsible for the PMBS phenomenon no longer had the money to fund it, nor pay back their investors (Duca, 2013). This caused a number of them to either close their doors for good or file for bankruptcy because of their lack of both investors, and capital.

After the PMBS bonds began failing, the housing market dove deeper into the depths of economics. As PMBS institutions began filing for bankruptcy, the additional loans they had been offering were no longer present (Duca, 2013). This reversal on demand had an important effect upon the market. With housing prices at an all-time high, but demand beginning to decrease, several issues began surfacing. The first issue was with the borrower; the price of a home often dropped so much that a purchaser's home would be extremely overvalued. This left the purchaser to either pay a high mortgage for a home that is worth much less, or let the bank foreclose it (Duca, 2013). This increased the severity of the already brewing crisis.

Supply and Demand in 2008

The next issue to examine within the market was that of both supply and demand. The housing market went from not having enough supply, as well as an overabundance of demand (because of PMBS), to having a lower demand and an abundant supply (Lerner, 2008). This situation only got worse as buyers began to drop out of the overpriced market. This left the sellers stuck with an overvalued home, and no way to pay their mortgage (Lerner, 2008). Houses went from being extremely overvalued, to being undervalued far below the price a homeowner paid for the property

(Duca, 2013). This ultimately left the homeowner, bank, and investors with a loan that was undervalued in comparison to the actual housing price. This fluctuation puts on full display the importance of equilibrium between supply and demand in cases like the housing market.

The subprime mortgage crisis taught Americans that borrowing money without sufficient income to repay it back is risky and that packaging risk within risk does not solve the problem. Just because a loan is offered doesn't mean one should take it (Wachter & Keys 2018). While the 2008 crisis taught many lessons, it may be possible that another, smaller housing crisis is upon us due to the COVID pandemic.

COVID-19 Early Months

The year 2020 has changed many things within the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic which has been causing worry and fear globally. This is evident in the United States as well as global economic markets. Within these markets COVID-19 has affected, some of the damages are already on full display. For example, the initial effect of COVID-19 upon the housing market was a decrease in sales due to the early lockdown that caused businesses to temporarily close (Buhayar, 2020). While more information is coming out each day, COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the world as a whole.

Within the current housing market, a decrease in sales has allowed for bidding wars, within a market that lacked supply in the first place. The market had cooled initially with the threat of the pandemic, with sales of existing homes falling 20% in April of 2020 (Buhayar, 2020). Construction of new homes also plunged because of the virus, which only means getting new supply will be even harder (Buhayar, 2020). The spring market took an early hit from COVID-19, dropping in March as well as early indications that it would drop in April (Buhayar, 2020). This, as well as the country being on lockdown, slowed the builder's market (Buhayar, 2020). Without the normal rate of newly introduced houses, the market was lacking on the supply side.

The creation of houses in the early COVID-19 months slowed, which in turn put a kink in the supply chain for the remainder of the year. This kink was on full display in housing prices in the early spring months (Buhayar, 2020). This has left many people with a tough option: buying a potentially overpriced house, or staying out of the market entirely. Many individuals, including first-time homebuyers, are rushing to purchase a home before prices rise even more (Shiller, 2020). They are doing so in hopes that the long-term effect of the market will not negatively affect their house price (Shiller, 2020). These bidding wars between buyers show the volatility of the market. In the article, *Bidding Wars are Back in Housing Market Stung by Pandemic*, the stories of multiple COVID-19 home buyers are told. All of these stories are accompanied by an overpriced

home, of which the buyer had to pay an above-market price to obtain the house because of the lack of supply in the market (Buhayar, 2020). This lack of supply along with many other factors has caused real home prices to rise 45% from February of 2012 to May of 2020 (Shiller, 2020). While there are different opinions to be made of the topic, knowing when to buy or when not to is an extremely hard decision within the real estate market.

COVID-19 Recent Months

While the initial effect on the market was negative, as of recent months housing prices seem to have rebounded. Within the second quarter of 2020 housing prices per square foot rose at a faster rate than any three-month period leading up to the 2008 financial crisis (“Why, despite the coronavirus pandemic” 2020). The answers for this can be found within how the country has dealt with the virus. Central banks around the world have continued to slash rates, with a 30-year mortgage in the U.S. set at 2.9% (“Why, despite the coronavirus pandemic”, 2020). This has allowed for people to manage their money more effectively (“Why, despite the coronavirus pandemic”, 2020).

Off of these low interest rates, buyers are motivated to purchase a home. People who are now working remotely because of the virus are especially motivated. They now have the opportunity to live farther away from metropolitan areas, and have been using the low-interest rates to capitalize on this (Stankiewicz, 2020). This increase in demand is just one piece of the rising levels in the housing market. While there is no way to tell what the future brings, it appears that COVID-19 may have been just a blip in the housing market timeline.

III. Methods

Subjects

Participants for this study were the Federal Reserve, the Federal Housing Finance Agency, the Federal Housing Finance Agency, as well as citizens across the United States that are participants within the housing market. Information obtained for this study was gathered from public resources.

Measures

To compare the 2008 housing crisis with the current COVID-19 pandemic, data was gathered on foreclosure rates nationally from 2004-2019, the housing price index grouped nationally from 2004-2019, and the national federal funds rate from 2004-2020.

Procedure

This paper utilizes both peer-reviewed articles, and modern-day news reports to back this knowledge. The number of different indicators investigated allows for more of a

precise conclusion. The databases EBSCOHost and business Source Premier were used to locate journal articles, and Google was used to locate other information. The search terms included: “COVID or Corona”; “Housing Market”; “2008 and Housing Market and Crash”; “Real Estate Investment and U.S. or United States”; “Foreclosure or Foreclosure Rates”; “Subprime Mortgage Crisis”; and “Coronavirus Timeline.” These terms yielded a variety of peer-reviewed articles and news articles and the data necessary to examine the hypotheses.

IV. Results

Investigating the Federal Funds Rate

Figure 2 contains data on the Federal Funds rate from 2004 to 2019. Showing date preceding the and after the 2008 market crash. The Federal Funds rate was increased from 1.76% in 2004 to 4.76% in 2007, and thereafter it was decreased again to .97% by 2008. (Table 1). It then hovered below 1.00% until 2017 where it rose to 1.15% (Table 1). Staying above 1.00% up until 2020 where the rate dropped back down to .90%. In the two most recent years, 2019 and 2020, the federal funds rate has decreased (Figure 1).

Investigating Foreclosure Rate

Figure 2 also contains data on the Percent of Single-Family Foreclosed Loans from 2004-2019. The percentage of foreclosed homes in 2004 was 15.42%, it then rose each year up until its height of 22.81% in 2008 (Table 1). The foreclosure rate then proceeded to decline up until 2013 where it was 6.74%. (Table 1). After 2013 there was a brief period where the rate increased to 11.26% in 2014 (Table 1). However, after this jump, it began decreasing again, finishing 2019 at 2.48% (Table 1).

Investigating Housing Price Index

The last variable analyzed in both Figure 2 and Table 1 is Housing Price Index (HPI). HPI data was used with a 2000 base in order to account for the gradual effect of inflation. The value began in 2004 at 126.71 and increased up until 2007. In 2007, it reached an initial high point at 151.6, only to drop down to 144.91 in 2008. During the years after 2008, HPI decreased below the initial 2004 starting point. It reached a low of 119.34 in 2012, but has since rebounded. Climbing to its highest measure yet back in 2019 at 167.11.

Comparing Federal Funds Rate, Foreclosure Rates, and HPI

There are some strong relationships between the Federal Funds Rate, the Foreclosure Rate, and House Prices. Prior to the 2008 economic crisis: foreclosures

increased from 2004-2008, during this period the federal funds rate increased until 2006, and the housing price index increased until 2007 (Table 1). This all changed when the market crashed in 2008. Foreclosures began to decrease (Table 1), the federal funds rate climbed no higher than 1% for eight years (Table 1), and there was a five-year drought on housing prices (Table 1). While data is not out yet on how the current COVID housing market is being affected, the ever-decreasing federal funds rate offers possible conclusions. It appears that while there are some instances that the rate works alongside foreclosures and housing price index to indicate a trend, there are also places where it fails to do so. For the time period from 2008 to 2016 where the rate was always below 1% (Table 1); both foreclosures and HPI had varying results.

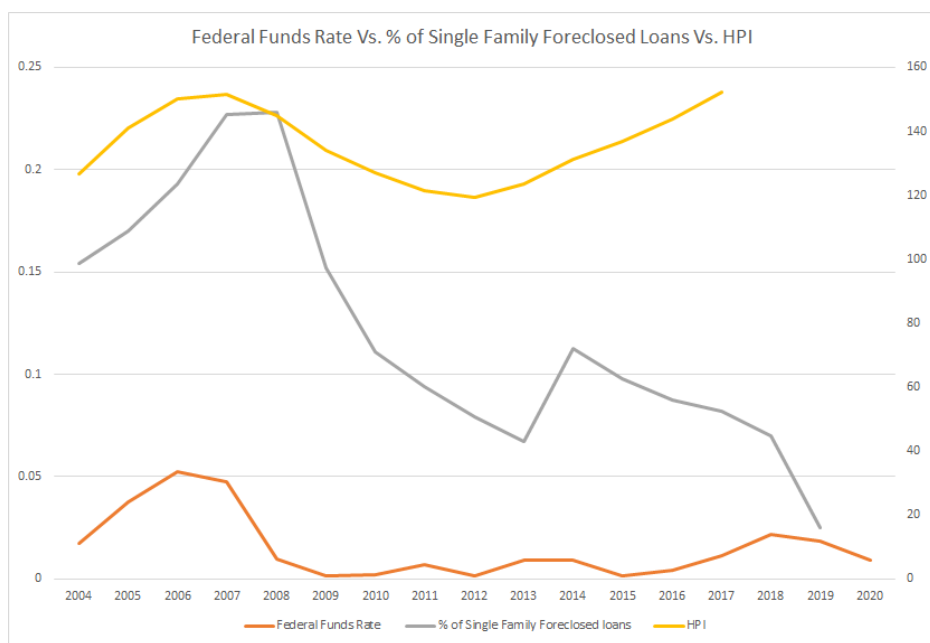


Figure 2: Percentage of single-family foreclosed loans per year. Source: FHA Single Family Home Performance Trends (2019).

V. Discussion

H1: The current COVID-19 pandemic is creating housing issues of lesser but still similar value to that of 2008; these issues like in 2008 provide an opportunity for profit by individuals prepared to investigate the market.

H2: The 2008 housing crisis provided an opportunity for profit. This situation is being replicated today with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Year (taken in October every year)	Federal Funds Rate	Percent of Single-Family Foreclosed loans	HPI
2004	1.76%	15.42%	126.71
2005	3.78%	16.99%	141.05
2006	5.25%	19.31%	150.13
2007	4.76%	22.68%	151.6
2008	0.97%	22.81%	144.91
2009	0.12%	15.21%	134.01
2010	0.19%	11.11%	127.18
2011	0.70%	9.38%	121.62
2012	0.16%	7.91%	119.34
2013	0.90%	6.74%	123.56
2014	0.90%	11.26%	131.14
2015	0.12%	9.77%	136.7
2016	0.40%	8.72%	143.98
2017	1.15%	8.21%	152.11
2018	2.19%	6.97%	161.02
2019	1.83%	2.48%	167.11
2020	0.90%		

Table 1: Federal Funds Rate, % of Single-Family Foreclosed Loans, HPI. Sources: FHA Single Family Home Performance Trends (2019), Effective Federal Funds Rate, (2020), House Price Index (2020).

The Housing Market

During this investigation of the 2008 and 2020 housing markets, researchers have identified certain variables that indicate trends. While there appeared to be no direct correlation between these three variables (i.e., foreclosures, the Federal Funds, and HPI - Housing Price Index); conclusions from the data can be drawn. The first half of the first hypothesis about the correlation between the 2020 and the 2008 recession (H1: The current COVID-19 pandemic is creating housing issues of lesser but still similar value to that of 2008;) is not supported because of the lack of correlation of the Federal Funds rate, foreclosure rates, as well as HPI in 2008 and 2020, but similarities between 2020 and 2008 can be drawn.

Foreclosures

During the first period of investigation from 2004 to 2008, the foreclosures rate peaked in 2008, but was increasing from 2004 on up. During the next period of investigation, 2008 to 2012, the foreclosure rate decreased each year, reaching 7.91% in 2012 as foreclosure rates dropped as the market tried to rebound from a horrific showing in 2008. This was coupled with a substantial decrease in subprime mortgages because of a lack of PMBS funding. The period of investigation from 2012 to 2019 showed that the foreclosure rate was at its highest in 2014 at 11.26% but has since proceeded to drop, falling at a steady pace until 2018, and then experiencing over a 4% drop in 2019.

Federal Funds

During the years of 2004 to 2008, the Federal Funds Rate was at its height in 2006, and despite some decline, the rate was still much higher than it was in 2004. In the next group of years from 2008 to 2012, the Federal Funds Rate remained below the 2008 value of 0.97% because the government was using this rate as a tool to cool off the crisis. During the final years of investigation from 2012 to 2020 the Federal funds rate stayed relatively low, with its height being in 2018 at 2.19%. The only other years from 2013-2020 that it is above 1% is 2017 at 1.15% and 2019 at 1.83%.

Housing Price Index

During the period from 2004 to 2008, the Housing Price Index peaked in 2007, but still remained high during the crash of 2008. After this, from 2008 to 2012, the HPI decreased from 144.91 in 2008 to 119.34 because homes were overvalued. Last from 2012-2019, the Housing Price (HPI) has seen a steady increase, with the 2013 period starting at 123.56 and ending in 2019 at 167.11.

Comparison

Foreclosures, the Federal Funds rate, and HPI - Housing Price Index, are correlated between 2004, and 2008, with each variable increasing for several years prior to the 2008 recession. These three variables were positively correlated prior to the crash, which allows for conclusions to be drawn. From 2008 to 2012, the three variables, foreclosures, the Federal Funds rate, and HPI had a weaker correlation, and each of the variables decreased. From 2012 to 2020, the correlation between the variables continued to weaken. With the variables failing to line up in a way that could show a relationship between them.

Future Investigations

Although the data for 2020 is not out yet, certain estimations can be made. While initially, one would think the data would continue its downward descent towards a 0% Federal Funds Rate, economic conditions could suggest otherwise. The current pandemic has thrown many questions up into the air, and the status of the housing market is one of them. While it remains strong still, the disruption to “normal” life would suggest an economic disturbance.

As discussed in the literature review section, the Coronavirus and its implications upon humanity are largely unknown. Yet one fact has surfaced, while it appears that Americans are doing fine at the current moment, the country can only continue at this rate for so long. Ultimately, shutting down an economy for a period of time, only to reopen at an extremely slow pace will have its implications. I believe these issues could appear further down the road and cause a disruption to the market.

COVID-19 has most definitely thrown a wrench in the growth of the market itself. While housing prices will most likely remain higher because of the lack of supply of homes, much is left unknown about the condition of the market. While it may experience a drop it also may continue its upward trend, the only thing that is certain is this virus has left the markets even more unpredictable. Although COVID-19 and its effects are too fresh to know its exact implications, I believe one of two things to be true. First, Americans were hit hard by the slowdown of the economy, and it is seen throughout the housing market in each of the variables discussed above. After more housing supply begins to surface as life returns to a more normal state, the housing prices may cool. Second, with the hopes of a successful vaccine in the near future, this pandemic was a mere blip in the market, and it will continue its upwards trend with prices continuing to rise. Before the COVID-19 pandemic the economy was booming, once a solution to this issue is presented, the only way for the market will be up.

The data from foreclosures, the Federal Funds rate, and HPI didn't show any direct relationships that allowed for either hypothesis; the current COVID-19 pandemic is creating housing issues of lesser but still similar value to that of 2008; or these issues like in 2008 provide an opportunity for profit by individuals prepared to investigate the market, to be confirmed. The first hypothesis that the market will drop in a similar fashion to 2008 was not supported because of the lack of current data available. In years to come, however, similar studies can be conducted in order to determine if the market experienced effects similar to 2008 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second hypothesis that the current market will offer an opportunity for profit if invested in, also cannot be verified for similar reasons. It appears that the market has not suffered at the hands of COVID-19 as housing prices appear to be continuing to climb, however, the uncertainty of this virus leaves the market in question. While there are many potential investment strategies that could be adopted from the data presented, at this point doing so would be a mere guess. While it is my feeling that the market could experience a dip because of COVID, no data has indicated that yet. Therefore, I cannot accurately advise on which segments would be profitable, or how to profit off of them.

VI. Conclusions

General Conclusions

This thesis was executed with the intention to further investigate and understand the housing market. From 2004 to 2020, the market has shown many similarities while also many differences. These similarities, however, were not enough to draw comparisons from the 2008 housing market crisis to the current housing climate. While this is also the case when looking into profitability within the market, a number of conclusions were able to be drawn. These conclusions have allowed for new hypotheses to be formed. While there is no current data available to back these claims up, only future investigations will hold the truth about what our current housing market is experiencing.

The difference between the 2008 crisis as well as the current housing market allow for new hypotheses to be investigated. The 2008 crisis was largely caused by subprime mortgages that caused a massive number of foreclosures. The 2020 market has been facing a global pandemic which one would think would all but shut down an economy. However, people are still working, buying homes, and watching prices soar, with few homes falling into foreclosure. This presents a new topic to investigate, how each situation was handled differently, and how each situation ultimately led to its effect upon the marketplace.

Implications for Research: Use and Application

Future research should include more variables to draw conclusions from. For example, adding in unemployment, GDP, and other macroeconomic indicators will help to compare the economic environment to the housing market. Also, data from 2020 to 2024 should be investigated so that a clear picture of the Coronavirus's effects on the housing market can be drawn. Last, more indicators for profitability data should be used. I think researchers should investigate the profitability of different forms of investment within the real estate market.

Implications for Practice: Improving Profits

Practitioners should consider implementing a similar strategy used after 2008 of offering low-interest rates when the market appears to be struggling. Practitioners should also offer aid programs to prevent foreclosure. Foreclosures are the root of many problems in the housing market, and preventing foreclosures will help keep both the HPI and the market itself, climbing. Another key piece to any economic issue is cash flow. If Americans are afraid to spend money then there will be less money in circulation, which will have extremely negative effects on both the housing market, as well as the United States economy as a whole. Focusing on keeping cash circulating will stimulate all parts of the economy as well as the housing market.

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The Media's Impact on Voter Indecision in the Aftermath of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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Note to Readers: *This thesis was researched and completed by May 2020, well before Election Day 2020. As such, the 2020 election may sometimes be referred to as “the upcoming election.” While some updates have been made since this work’s original completion, which are generally included as footnotes, there may still be other instances in which events that have passed seem to be discussed in present or future tense. When these cases occur, please be mindful of this note.*

In this thesis, I explore the following question: What is the effect of the mass media’s miscalculation of the 2016 U.S. presidential election on the rise in voter indecision in 2020? In so doing, I engage archival research, media sources, and conduct survey research to analyze the rising percentage of voter indecision, as well as biases presented by the media and the effect of such from 2016 onward. I attempt to isolate the effect of mass media as a particularly strong causal trigger for voter indecision in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential races by briefly recognizing and discussing other possible causes of indecision including polarization, candidate unfavorability, and reelection bias. For the purposes of this thesis, the term media refers to the various outlets including, but not limited to, news media, social media, broadcast television, the internet and the radio. On some occasions, the discourse will isolate one particular media outlet for deliberation.

I. Introduction

In this thesis, I explore the following question: What is the effect of the mass media’s miscalculation of the 2016 U.S. presidential election (and the public’s resulting shock) on the rise in voter indecision in 2020? “Statistician and journalist Nate Silver documented that nearly 13 percent of voters nationally claimed to be undecided even in the week before the election, a rate about three times higher than in 2012” (Valentino, 112). Through archival research and the use of a survey, this thesis will analyze the rising percentage of indecision in voting culture, especially in the wake of the 2016 election. In addition, this thesis analyzes whether media outlets report the upcoming 2020 election

¹ Written under the direction of Dr. Cyril Ghosh and Dr. Patricia Moynagh in partial fulfillment of the Senior Program requirements.

differently, as a result of their epic errors in 2016. There are a number of variables that may cause the increase in voter indecision, such as candidate unfavorability, which according to many was the cause of voter indecision in 2016. Yet, in this thesis, I hypothesize that media bias and miscalculation are significant variables which may cause a much greater increase in voter indecision than indecision caused by candidate unfavorability, particularly in 2020.

It is important to point out some caveats here, before we proceed. The survey conducted for this research is only about New Yorkers. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized for the country as a whole. Rather than saying this research is about how American voter indecision is affected by the media's bias, it will focus modestly on how New York voter indecision is affected by the media's bias. If others replicate this survey in other cities, they may come to the same conclusion, but this research is only about New Yorkers.

II. Background

Evidence of Increased Voter Indecision

The mean level of undecided voters, as captured by national polls, was proven to be at its highest in the 2016 presidential election -- out of all the elections between 2004 and 2016 (Bon et al, *Polling Bias*, 7). Between the ninety-day mark and approximately the seventy-fifth day until the election, 2016 came second only to the 2008 election race in terms of voter indecision. After roughly the seventy-fifth day until the election, the 2016 race had more undecided voters than all other presidential election races from 2004 onward. Both 2008 and 2016 saw a drastically higher amount of voter indecision (more than 10%) than the other elections, which saw 5-7% of undecided voters. Election races prior to 2004 were excluded from this analysis because data for those years is hard to find. "State-level polling data for U.S. presidential elections where a majority of the polls included an undecided voter category was not found for years prior to 2004" (Bon et al, 6). In order to support the theory that the media had an impact on this increased voter indecision that is discussed at length later in this thesis, a brief background on the media's impact on political behavior must be included.

Media Impact on Political Behavior

The mass media has impacted the political behavior of Americans, including New Yorkers, before. During World War II, "... many Americans pointed to the power of the mass media... mass media technologies in and of themselves forced audiences to tune their senses toward a single, powerful source... They became vulnerable to whatever

charisma the source might possess” (Klinenberg, 85). This quote relates to American fascists who rallied at Madison Square Garden in New York and supports how strong the impact of the media on the political behavior of Americans, especially New Yorkers, can be. Media propaganda had been relatively high during this period of history in New York -- and the media remains an impactful source today. With the 2020 U.S. presidential election approaching, the increasing spread of misinformation by the mass media may be proven to have a strong impact on the current voting behavior of New Yorkers.

A Useful Analogy

The 2016 U.S. presidential election is analogous to the 2015 British general election in that both came as a shock to most observers, both showing some of the most inaccurate election polling:

In historical terms, the 2015 polls were some of the most inaccurate since election polling first began in the UK in 1945... The primary cause of the polling miss in 2015 was unrepresentative samples. The methods the pollsters used to collect samples of voters systematically over-represented Labour supporters and under-represented Conservative supporters... The other putative causes can have made, at most, only a small contribution to the total error. There may have been a very modest ‘late swing’ to the Conservatives between the final polls and Election Day, although this can have contributed – at most – around one percentage point to the error on the Conservative lead (Sturgis et al, 4).

The inquiry into the 2015 British general election concluded that late-deciding voters were not the major cause of the misprediction of the election results. Instead, a bias in the polling, which was then disseminated by various media outlets, was the major cause of the misprediction of the election results. This is interesting because it supports that biased polling and biased media are the causal factors, while the voters are merely the victims of this process. This is antithetical to the mainstream blame on late-deciding voters (in both the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2015 British general election) for the greatly unexpected election results.

In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, late-deciding or “shy Trump” voters were not necessarily the causal factors of misprediction. Because undecided voters were a diverse population of “Republicans and Democrats, young and old, the well-educated and the less well educated, and whites and nonwhites,” they are likely not the causal factors of the shocking election results (Cohn, 2017). Instead, biased polls and biased media may have been the trigger, as state polls were especially proven to be inaccurate because of their failure to weigh the polls by education. In the 2016 presidential election surveys, key faults included “over-representation of college graduates (without appropriate adjustment)...” (Bon et al, *Polling Bias*, 5; also see Durand, 3). It is likely that such

inaccuracies cause voter indecision, rather than voter indecision causing the inaccuracies. Though it is possible that the two may work reciprocally, this research is centered on how such inaccuracies (particularly in the media) cause indecision.

Returning to the analogy, the political climate of Britain became much more indecisive during the period following the biased polling of the 2015 general election, as seen through Brexit. The U.S. may be experiencing a similar pattern, in which biased polling and biased media in the 2016 U.S. presidential election caused both inaccuracy and increased voter indecision. Although the discussion of the 2016 U.S. presidential election as analogous to the 2015 British general election focuses largely on biased polling rather than the bias of mass media, it is important because the mass media is a major disseminator of news related to this kind of biased polling. If the mass media showcases biased information without acknowledging that there is a bias, as it frequently did in 2016, it itself is then misleading. The analogy is also significant because it further supports that voters may be the victims of bias rather than the causes of bias.

III. Causes of Voter Indecision

A number of competing hypotheses might also be advanced. A brief excursion into these competing causes of voter indecision that some studies have focused on (including polarization, candidate unfavorability, and reelection bias) is relevant to this thesis, as this thesis makes an effort to isolate the effect of mass media as a particularly strong causal trigger for voter indecision both in 2016 and in 2020.²

Polarization

A frequently cited cause of indecision, particularly in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, is polarization. Indeed, polarization and indecision were both at a peak during the 2016 election; however, that does not necessarily mean that the two are related and it most certainly does not mean polarization had an impact on increased indecision. The documentary *11/8/16* is one of the sources that focus on polarization in the 2016 election and the accompanying voter uncertainty and shock. The film entailed fifty different cameramen following fifty different real-life voters throughout their day, but not just any day – election day.

In the film, Hana, a Kent State University student who was campaigning for Hillary Clinton and was president of the College Democrats, stated “My greatest fear is

² This section does not intend to deny any effect alternative variables may have on voter indecision, but to make the argument that their effect is not as significant as that of mass media bias.

that I'm going to flip out on a student for telling me that they're going to vote for Donald Trump. It's never been so personal." While this quote is evidence that polarization was a major problem during this time, it nevertheless does not support anything regarding indecision, as Hana was a strong Clinton supporter with no indecisiveness regarding her vote. Jesus, a community organizer and dreamer included in the documentary, stated "I definitely think that this election brought out a lot of hate and racism," also citing a possible peak for polarization, but not supporting indecision, as he was also a strong Clinton supporter with no doubts of his vote. When Vetress, a real estate broker and local politician in Chicago, sat at a table discussing the election, a man at the table referred to Trump as a "divisionist" (Argott). These statements made by American voters all cite "flipping out" on voters of the other party, hate, racism, and division, reflecting the focus on increased polarization as influential in the 2016 election, but not as influential to the *indecision* of voters at the time.

Tom, a business owner of Franklin, Massachusetts, said, "There's a lot more of them than there is of me. It makes me feel like they're going to win," (Argott). This statement can be interpreted as implying that the feeling of polarization (them versus me) may lead to one doubting their vote, but, in reality, Tom was a strong Trump supporter from beginning to end. The feeling of polarization never influenced Tom's vote. Additionally, Tom wore a "Make America Great Again" cap publicly throughout the entire documentary, suggesting he was not a "shy Trump supporter" either.

Thus, the media's effect on voter indecision might be discernibly isolated from the effects of polarization. While polarization has been a focal point of the 2016 election, the biased media's effect on indecision should also be a focus, as media bias and indecision were both relatively high during the 2016 election and may continue to increase in relation to each other. In the background of *11/8/16*, with less attention, there is some representation given to "the kind of voters who did exist in 2016 – those fueled by rightwing fake news, Breitbart talking points and conspiracy theories" (Gabbatt, 2017). Thus, it is evident that the effect of media biases on voters in the context of the 2016 election necessitates greater attention.

Candidate Unfavorability

Another frequently cited cause of voter indecision is candidate unfavorability. According to at least one report, the 2016 U.S. presidential election "was unique in that a) there was a relatively high number of undecided voters and b) the major party candidates had high unfavorability ratings" (Bon et al, *Psychology of Voter Indecision*, 1). The report then continues on to cite the high levels of candidate unfavorability as the cause of increased indecision. Scholars, not limited to the authors of *Psychology of Voter*

Indecision, have used psychological theories of decision making, including the decision field and prospect theories, to explain the causal link between candidate unfavorability and voter indecisiveness. In the context of the 2016 election, these scholars argued that: “Psychologically speaking, choices between unfavorable options (e.g., finding the better of two evils) take longer and result in more deliberation and indecisiveness than choices between favorable options” (12-3). While it is undeniable that candidate unfavorability may lead to higher levels of voter indecision, the mass media is largely responsible for a candidate’s favorability and it is ultimately the media’s portrayal of candidates and the presidential race that influences the voters. As the vast majority of voters do not know the candidates personally, their perception of the candidates comes from second-hand information -- the mass media.

For an example of how media outlets shape voters’ perceptions of candidates, we look to the representation of Donald J. Trump in the 2016 presidential race. The mass media disseminated the misinformation in Trump’s tweets, increasing the candidate’s unfavorability ratings and voter uncertainty, as explained in a book assembled by the sociologist Eric Klinenberg:

... Trump spit out bits of fiction and hyperbole. They piled up like tiny bricks, slowly but surely walling off the landscape of reality. In its place, Trump hung billboards depicting his own imagined magnificence. The mass media pointed to Trump’s tweets, ridiculed their lies, lampooned their tone—and spread them far and wide... And through Twitter, he [Trump] put himself at the center of the storm (Klinenberg, 83).

Trump’s unfavorability started on social media, Twitter specifically, during the 2016 presidential race and was disseminated so widely by the mass media that voter indecision increased. And the mass media’s dissemination of Trump’s tweets has continued throughout 2020. On May 5, 2020, he ranted about a mere ad in a Twitter thread, calling other members of his own political party, “a group of RINO Republicans,” “loser types” and a “disgrace.” He went so far as to say “I don’t know what Kellyanne did to her deranged loser of a husband, Moonface, but it must have been really bad.” These tweets were then disseminated by *CNN*, *The Washington Post*, *NBC*, *The Guardian*, and several other news media sources, which is likely to cause a continuation of unfavorability and indecision regarding the candidate.³ Evidently, while candidate unfavorability and voter

³ Fall 2020 update: The dissemination of Trump’s ill-favored tweets by mass media sources may have been a contributing factor not only to his loss of the popular vote in 2016, but to his loss in 2020 as well. If so, it may be the case that his unfavorability actually helped voters rule him out and come to a decision.

indecision are related, as concluded in *Biased Polls and the Psychology of Voter Indecision*, the former does not necessarily cause the latter.

Rather, it may be the mass media's biased portrayal of the presidential race that increases voter indecision, as supported further by Klinenberg's research: "As mainstream news media sensationalized and trivialized what was at stake in the elections, social media amplified misinformation and propaganda. These media pathologies paved the way for the triumph of a demagogue. While criticism of such problems has escalated since the election..." (45). These lines suggest that the media is responsible for the election results. Although sometimes the blame has been laid on late-revealing or "shy Trumpers," it appears that these voters are actually victims rather than the accused. If a person was genuinely undecided and then came out for Trump, they were labeled shy Trumpers. Meanwhile, the reality is that there were shy Trumpers *and* there were undecided voters who decided to vote for Trump. These are distinctive categories, not to be merged. It is not good enough that the media claims that all the people who declared late that they supported Trump were "shy Trumpers." It is an unfalsifiable claim. And, as a result, not very useful.

Although there are media outlets that do not merely disseminate news, but instead fact-check, this did not stop the rapid spread of misleading information throughout the 2016 election. Additionally, since criticism of the media has escalated since the election, it may be the case that voter indecision has escalated since the 2016 election as well -- as will be discussed in greater depth in later chapters. Candidate unfavorability will be briefly revisited in the context of 2020, particularly in the section on Joe Biden's sexual assault allegations.

Reelection Bias

Reelection bias can be eliminated from the pool of alternative independent variables that might be said to have caused voter indecision. According to Smidt: There is no evidence to suggest a significant reelection bias. Compared to other elections, there is an observed tendency for floating voter rates to be 1.5-2 percentage points higher in elections without a candidate who ran previously, but this difference is insignificant. Many reelections also fail to exhibit greater stability, as both 1992 and 2004 were reelection campaigns with higher rates of floating voters. About 8.65% of Americans are floating voters when presidents run a second time, compared to 10.69% otherwise, and 10.07% if 1968 is excluded, when Johnson opted against running out of fear of losing (Smidt, 376).

The fact that reelections have shown relatively same rates of indecision as regular elections is important because it allows for variables such as the media's bias and miscalculation of the 2016 U.S. presidential election to be more reliable as the causal factors of the increase in voter indecision.

This research will observe whether voter indecision has further increased since 2016 and determine, if there is an increase, whether the increase is related to the media's bias and miscalculation of the 2016 election.

IV. Media Miscalculations Since the 2016 Presidential Election

Before discussing the media miscalculations since the 2016 election, the media miscalculations during the 2016 presidential election must be mentioned: "On the eve of the [2016] election...three types of information widely discussed in the news media pointed to a Clinton victory. All three turned out to be either misleading or wrong" (Durand, 5). Among the three types of misleading or wrong types of information, which Durand found to be widely discussed in the media, are "the patterns in early voting in key states" that were "described in numerous, high-profile news stories as favorable for Clinton, particularly in Florida and North Carolina" (Durand, 5). Yet, as Durand points out, Trump won both states. Secondly, Durand notes that "several election forecasts from highly trained academics and data journalists declared that Clinton's likelihood of winning was about 90 percent" (Durand, 5). Although one can argue that Clinton indeed won the popular vote and that the forecasts had also recognized a 10% chance of Clinton losing, the fact remains that the news media widely presented, at the very least, misleading information, when it was not outright wrong. The purpose of Durand's findings for this research is not to indict the media or imply it had any control over polling predictions, but instead to recognize the mass media's role in the spread of misleading information which in turn led to voter confusion and indecision.

That being said, while *data* journalists and pollsters may have recognized a 10% chance of Clinton losing, the majority of news media suggested that Trump had no chance of winning. According to *The Guardian*, "most news outlets had been taken by surprise by Trump's victory, had failed to see the rise of the electorate that would put him in the White House, and had been led by the clickbait of his tweets" (Guardian US et al, 2020). Margaret Sullivan, a media columnist for *The Washington Post*, said "The Sunday TV talk shows will bring on people like Kellyanne Conway, Trump's White House counsel, who is just an inveterate liar. By having her on, she is allowed to say things that aren't true and although she can be challenged it's still a very strong message having her on air," and Tara Swisher, a tech journalist and founder of *Recode*, said "If you're not scared when Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg says it's okay for politicians to lie, especially

in the context of a system that is so viral compared to any other media, you should be afraid” (Guardian US et al, 2020). Those whose careers are devoted to the media are admitting to the extreme pitfalls that the mass media is suffering from since the 2016 presidential race -- the wide spread of biased and misleading information is happening so rapidly and virally that, unfortunately, it cannot be prevented by the reliable media outlets which continue to fact-check. The word “virally” often has the connotation of social media, but should not be considered as such here. Social media outlets are often criticized as the most misleading. However, whether or not that may be the case is not of concern to this research, especially as it has been proven that the media’s shortcomings are not exclusive to social media. Rather, they have always existed, long before the rise of social media. As discussed above, they were a feature of radio and print sources during World War II. As will be discussed in the following section, this wide spread of misleading information is creating a culture of skepticism in our political behaviors.

Iowa Caucuses

Since the 2016 election, the public has scrutinized the 2020 Iowa caucus. *The New York Times* reported that “caucus results in Iowa may have been incorrectly reported for decades” (Epstein, 2020). However, the questionability of the 2016 caucus was not put under public scrutiny as it was in 2020, nor did any other caucus in history to-date face such scrutiny, suggesting an increase in voter skepticism and that there is a more keen eye on the media’s calculations since the shock of the 2016 election result. If the Iowa caucuses have always produced inconsistencies, the logical explanation for them suddenly facing increased public heat is that the 2016 presidential election results have brought miscalculation into the spotlight and caused people to be more skeptical of political polling calculations, as seen with Iowa. It must be recognized that the Iowa caucuses are not the only instance of inaccurately reported polling, but rather a prime example for this study.⁴

For the purpose of this research, it had been reported that “*The Associated Press* remains unable to declare a winner [for the 2020 Iowa democratic caucus] because it believes the results may not be fully accurate and are still subject to potential revision”

⁴ Fall 2020 update: Whether or not the Iowa caucuses were the slippery slope giving way to the voter fraud allegations of the Trump Administration may become the focus of other studies elsewhere. While voter skepticism among Democrats concentrated largely on Russian interference in 2016, voter skepticism among Republicans concentrated largely on internal voter fraud allegations in 2020; either instance can be evidence of the increased skepticism in voting culture.

(Jaffe, 2020). *The Associated Press (AP)* is credited as a neutral news source by most scholars. *AP*'s decision to withhold an analysis of the Iowa caucus and the major doubt surrounding the caucus can either suggest that *AP* was merely maintaining its trademark neutrality or that the media and the public are approaching the upcoming 2020 election with increased skepticism. *AP* reported that "the chaos and inconsistencies in the reporting of the results have raised widespread doubts and prompted sharp criticism of the process by candidates and party leaders" (Jaffe, 2020).

While the 2020 Iowa caucus can be interpreted as a mere ill-fated event exacerbating media miscalculation and voter skepticism, it also suggests that miscalculations and doubts are still on a steep rise. But, it is not an isolated ill-fated event. As aforementioned, the 2020 Iowa caucus relates to the 2016 Iowa caucus and likely the previous "decades" of caucuses as well. In 2016, the caucus was equally questionable according to many sources including the *AP* and *The New York Times*. The sudden scrutiny of Iowa caucuses suggests that the media is being more scrutinizing of the polls it gathers its information from and that voters have a more keen eye on such media calculations since the shock of the 2016 election result. According to one report in *The Guardian*, "Key figures from major US newspapers, news sites and TV [have] describe[d] their fears about covering this year's election" (Guardian US et al, 2020). This indicates a culture of skepticism even in the media during the 2020 election cycle and widespread fears of repeating the miscalculation of the last election. *The Guardian* and *The Columbia Journalism Review* interviewed 30 top media figures and commentators and asked "how ready they think we [news media outlets] are for the 2020 presidential election" (Guardian US et al, 2020). Margaret Sullivan, a media columnist for *The Washington Post*, told the interviewers "We're willing to use the word 'lie.' We've come a ways in that sense, but I'm still not particularly positive about how we're going to deal with 2020" (Guardian US et al, 2020). If the media cozies up to its newfound comfortability with calling out lies rather than merely disseminating them, the increase in voter indecision may be kept at bay.

Frontrunners Announced Later Than Usual

The increased skepticism since 2016 is further evident in how parties announced their frontrunners for 2020 much later than usual, particularly the Democratic party. According to Lauren Leatherby, a data journalist, and Paul Murray, a graphics developer, the media can inhibit political party abilities: "... And media fragmentation mean parties have lost some of their power to anoint a frontrunner," among the "largest group of candidates since at least 1980" (Leatherby, 2019). The fact that there were more candidates running in 2020 than usual and yet there was no frontrunner for the Democrats until much later in the race suggests an increased indecision in voting culture.

Meanwhile, the media's impact on the ability to announce a frontrunner for 2020 suggests that the media may be skewing the 2020 race just as much if not more so than it did in 2016. This further inhibited the ability of voters to decide on a candidate, as there were more candidates running and no leader among the pack.

Since the report by Leatherby and Murray was published, Elizabeth Warren and many others had dropped from the race, allowing for a reduction in indecision. Eventually, there were frontrunners. However, the facts remain that frontrunners were determined much later than usual, further suggesting there may have been more indecision in 2020 than previously.

The News Media's Reporting of Joe Biden's Alleged Sexual Assault

As Joe Biden became the presumptive Democratic nominee for president in the 2020 election, the way that mass media portrayed the candidate could have increased voter indecision -- especially when considering the reporting of the sexual assault allegations against Biden. Several news outlets had resisted reporting the allegations against Biden, revealing their political bias. This political bias could have ultimately increased voter indecision, particularly among Democratic voters, as information about the presumptive Democratic nominee had become uncertain and obscured by the news media.

The Associated Press stated that it did not publish Tara Reade's (the accuser) story in April 2019, at the time of her initial allegations against Biden, because "reporters were unable to corroborate her allegations, and aspects of her story contradicted other reporting" (Villa and Alter, 2020). *The Washington Post*, which also did not publish her initial story, said that Reade "did not mention the alleged assault or suggest there was more to the story" (Villa and Alter, 2020). *Time Magazine*, which leans left, ended an article about the allegation with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's quote: "Vice President Biden has vehemently denied these allegations and I support Vice President Biden," thus not-so-subtly suggesting that the media outlet itself is favoring Biden (Villa and Alter, 2020). Instead of allowing the readers to make conclusions based on their personal values, the news media is evidently trying to instill its own values into its readers. This could create a conflict of interests in which potential voters think "I feel this way, but the news is saying this other thing," making it more challenging to decide on a presidential candidate.

Having had some professional experience of my own in journalism, I can affirm that news outlets almost always race to publish stories before other sources. Yet, we note here that Reade's allegations, which could have hurt the Democratic campaign for the 2020 election, were brushed under the carpet for over a year. The results of the 2020 election may support some success in this tactic. According to one study, "the top" online news outlets, which gain more popular attention, are predominantly left or left-leaning

categories, while right or right-leaning news outlets gain less recognition (see Figure 1).⁵ Additionally, there are far fewer center or neutral news outlets, than there are left or right outlets, that made “the top online news” study (see Figure 1).⁶ If the majority of mainstream news outlets have Democratic values (see Figure 1) it makes sense that they were slower to report Tara Reade’s allegations against the Democratic nominee for president. Reade’s allegations were indeed treated differently by the news media than the allegations made by Christine Blasey Ford, who testified under oath that Brett Kavanaugh -- a Supreme Court justice found by *The Washington Post* to have the most conservative overall voting record on the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals between 2003 and 2018 -- sexually assaulted her. This supports the theory of a double standard in the news media, which Conservatives have been widely discussing.

The news media’s resistance to report the allegations against Biden also suggests that the media may have attempted to prevent the Democratic nominee from receiving higher unfavorability ratings. Meanwhile, sexual assault allegations were guaranteed to increase candidate unfavorability as the reporting of such allegations was unavoidable. However, the increase in candidate unfavorability would not necessarily cause an increase in voter indecision. Candidate unfavorability could just as potentially help voters make a decision by enabling them to eliminate the candidate from their voting options. Instead, it is the reporting method of such allegations that can likely increase voter indecision due to the obscure nature of the reporting itself, which leaves the public not knowing what to believe. Although it is not unusual to not know whom to believe in sexual assault allegations (as they suffer from the “he said, she said” syndrome), the obscurities in the news media’s reporting of the allegations deepens the dilemma.

It is plausible that the news media’s switch from its usual and bold support of the victim (as seen in the Kavanaugh allegations) to unusual and subtle support of the accused (Biden) is a manipulation of the “he said, she said” syndrome, which in turn

⁵ Although the idea of a liberal news media is controversial and has been questioned by scholars like Eric Alterman, New York culture could give way to an increased dissemination of left-leaning news over the alternative. Additionally, it is important to point out that while this study by AllSides may have some shortcomings, it is still worth attention as a representation of the most likely intake of news by New Yorkers.

⁶ The lack of neutral or central news outlets could potentially be truer for the population of New Yorkers (61.9%, as calculated in 2015-2019 according to the US Census) who do not receive higher education; thus being at a possible disadvantage for finding the more reputable and neutral news sources which are oftentimes drowned out by the large wave of left-leaning news in the region.



Figure 1. The leading online news media sources are predominantly left or left-leaning, while there are far fewer centered news media sources than there are either left or right sources, as supported by 2019 bias ratings measured by AllSides from “LibGuides: Detecting Bias: Leanings of Magazines, Newspapers.” *LibGuides at Lorain County Community College*, 29 Apr. 2020, <https://libguides.lorainccc.edu/c.php?g=29395&p=183699>.

cultivates uncertainty. Since there is little to no hard evidence indicting one conviction over the other in the “he said, she said” conundrum, the media is given the freedom to choose a side based on its own bias and encourage others to take that side as well, which was seen in *Time Magazine’s* article ending on Senator Kirsten Gillibrand’s quote: “... I support Vice President Biden,” (Villa and Alter, 2020).

These ways of reporting on allegations in 2020 indicates that there is a continuing bias in the news media, as they had, in the past, quickly covered allegations against Conservatives, but are now slow to cover allegations against Democrats. This slow reporting shows a stepback by the media, since its miscalculation of the 2016 election. It also exemplifies the increase in biased media, which can exacerbate voter indecision by inducing greater uncertainties about the Democratic candidate. As potential voters observe the numerous biases in the media, they are faced with a dilemma: if the

information they are receiving is discernibly biased, how do they determine who to vote for?

V. Indecision Among New Yorkers

To test my hypothesis that voter indecision continues in the 2020 election cycle, I conducted some primary data collection among New York City residents. To ensure that the respondents are representative of New York City voters, the survey asked respondents if they will be eligible to vote in the 2020 primaries and if their permanent residence is located in the five boroughs. Respondents were then asked to specify the borough of their residence in addition to standard demographic questions. Then the survey transitioned into Likert scale questions asking about the respondents' perception of the media. For each question in which the respondents were asked to select a choice reflecting their perception of the media, neutral options were provided. Respondents would first select a choice that they believe reflects the perception that the general public has of the media. Then, they were asked to answer the question based on their own perception.

After nine demographic questions, the survey contained twenty questions assessing either the respondents' perception of the media, or their perception on voter indecision in the context of the 2016 or upcoming 2020 election.

The survey was distributed through email and recipients were asked to redistribute it to other New York City voters, thus using a snowball sampling technique. The survey link was also forwarded through text messages, and on Instagram and FaceBook accounts.

I will start with the demographic findings of the survey results and will then look at the perception of the media held by the respondent pool of New York City voters, as measured predominantly by Likert scale questions. As respondents were not forced to submit an answer to a question, some questions have a different number of respondents than other questions. The survey received a total of 88 respondents, but not all 88 respondents answered every question.

Demographics

The survey results reflect a mostly white, middle-class population residing in Staten Island and contain a relatively even distribution between male and female -- with a skew towards female (42.5% male to 57.5% female). As this survey uses the U.S. Census Bureau's categories for race and socioeconomic status, and the U.S. Census no longer includes Hispanic as a category for race, it is likely that some Hispanics identified as white, while other Hispanics may have selected "other." According to the U.S. Census Bureau's "About Race" webpage last revised on April 21, 2020:

The racial categories included in the census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. In addition, it is recognized that the categories of the race item include racial and national origin or sociocultural groups. People may choose to report more than one race to indicate their racial mixture, such as “American Indian” and “White.” People who identify their origin as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish may be of any race (US Census Bureau, 2020).

The recent exclusion of Hispanic as a category of race has been widely attributed to fears of deportation, as exacerbated by Trump’s administration. The fears may also be the reason why the survey has the appearance of a mostly “white” respondent pool. It is possible that many of these respondents are white Hispanic. It is also likely that some participants from lower-middle classes or upper-middle classes responded as middle class (Bird and Newport 2017, Mohan 2019, and Samuel 2016). These factors may explain why the respondents appear to make up a mostly white, middle class population. Additionally, there is an equal distribution between single and married respondents (45.68% single and 45.68% married) with the remainder of respondents either divorced or separated. (see Appendix A for figures representing the demographics of the pool of respondents).

Respondents’ Perception of the Media

Forty-three percent of respondents found that the indecision of American voters was increased in 2016 due to factors which may include media bias, compared to 28% who disagreed. The remaining percentage of respondents were neutral. This indicates that a substantial majority of New York voters recognize an increase in voter indecision. These respondents also confirm (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2) the mass media’s significant impact on voter behavior, which includes voter indecision.

Corroborating these findings, 10% of participants responded that they have not decided who they will vote for in the upcoming 2020 election. This can support that voter indecision has continued to increase since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as one study notes that historically speaking “about 8.65% of Americans are floating voters when presidents run a second time” (Smidt, 376). Although the percentage of undecided voters within the respondents appears to be down from 2016’s outstanding 13%, this can be accounted for by the statistics supporting that voter indecision is typically a couple percentage points lower when it is a reelection (376). While the 2020 reelection follows the pattern of being only a couple percentage points lower than the non-reelection, it also continues a pattern of increased voter indecision because the previous non-reelection had atypically higher rates of indecision. While this level of reelection bias is consistent with archival data, the voter indecision is inconsistently higher (376). If there is no increased

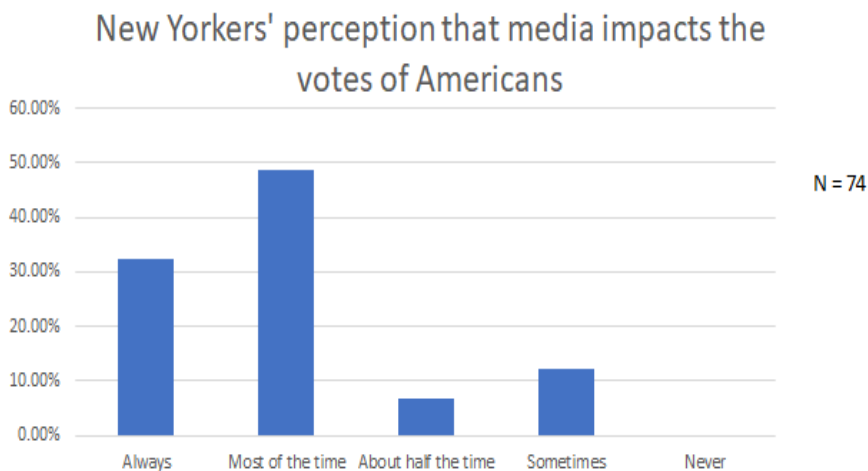


Figure 2.1. New York voters overwhelmingly recognize mass media’s large impact on voters. Not one participant answered that the media never impacts voting behavior.

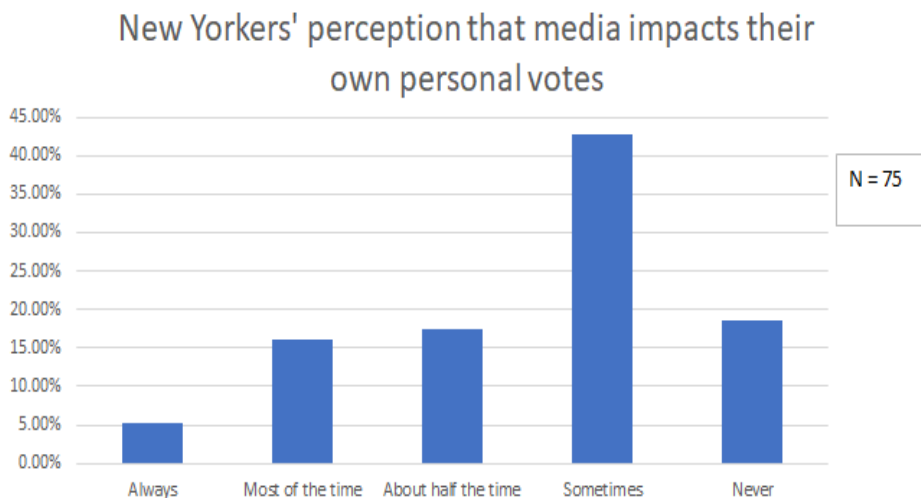


Figure 2.2. New York voters continue to recognize mass media’s impact on voting behavior, even when it comes to their own personal votes -- though there is an evident resistance to admit how strong that impact may be.

reelection bias to act as the cause of rising indecision, it is likely that the media's bias and miscalculation of the 2016 election is the cause.

This can be supported by the 81.69% of participants who responded that the media will either definitely or probably influence votes in the upcoming 2020 election. Only one person out of the 71 who responded to this question answered that the media will have no influence -- though more responded that there would be no influence when it came to the media's influence on their own personal vote, resulting in a drop to 68.05% of respondents acknowledging a media impact on their personal vote in the upcoming 2020 election.

The survey also indicates that the media is likely to repeat the mistakes made in the 2016 election, as 52.11% responded that they either very strongly agreed, strongly agreed, or agreed to the following: "The media is likely to miscalculate the upcoming 2020 presidential election results." These findings support that voter indecision both increased in 2016 and continues to increase; voter behavior, which includes voter indecision, is strongly impacted by the media; and that the media is perceived by New Yorker voters to be misleading. *The Guardian* published this common sentiment, stating that "there are already signs that mistakes of the magnitude of 2016 may be repeated..." (*Guardian US*, 2020).

VI. Analysis and Conclusion

Since the media has such a strong impact on voter behavior, it is likely that the increase in voter indecision has been due to the media's increased inability to present reliable impartial news, as seen in the reporting of allegations against Joe Biden. As mass media has continued to present biased information, voter indecision has continued to increase since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as supported by the 10% of survey participants who responded that they were undecided as to who they will vote for in the upcoming election. If voters cannot tell what the truth is about the candidates running for office, they are evidently increasingly unable to decide on a candidate. The fact that Iowa caucuses "have been incorrectly reported for decades," but yet faced intense public scrutiny for the first time in 2020, indicates that there is an increase in voter skepticism and that there is a more keen eye on the media's calculations since its miscalculation of the 2016 election outcome (Epstein, 2020). The fact there were more candidates running in 2020 than usual and yet there was no frontrunner for the Democrats until quite later in the race also suggests an increased indecision in voting culture, which researchers have attributed to the media (Leatherby, 2019).

Polarization, candidate unfavorability, and reelection bias all have a role in voter behavior, but, as I have argued in the preceding pages, those are not necessarily the paramount causes of voter indecision. Rather, the mass media's bias and miscalculation in the 2016 election appears to be one of the primary causes of the increased voter indecision in 2020. Voter indecision continues to increase in 2020 alongside the media's steady bias, which was perceived by New York voters and was evident in the media's hyperbolization and overemphasis on trivialities like Trump's tweets; the resistance to report the sexual assault allegations against Biden; and the late announcement of frontrunners due to "media fragmentation" (Leatherby, 2019). While the reporting of and sudden attention to inconsistencies in the 2020 Iowa caucus show that some media outlets are trying to be more reliable than ever before (with more fact-checking and less mere dissemination), there is still an influential wave of bias and misleading-information dissemination that is yet to be overcome. This wave is raising the levels of voter indecision and is creating a larger culture of skepticism around politics that goes beyond voters and voting behavior. Indeed, it contributes to a wider disillusionment with politics itself.

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Appendix A: Figures Representing the Demographics of the Pool of Respondents

Distribution by borough

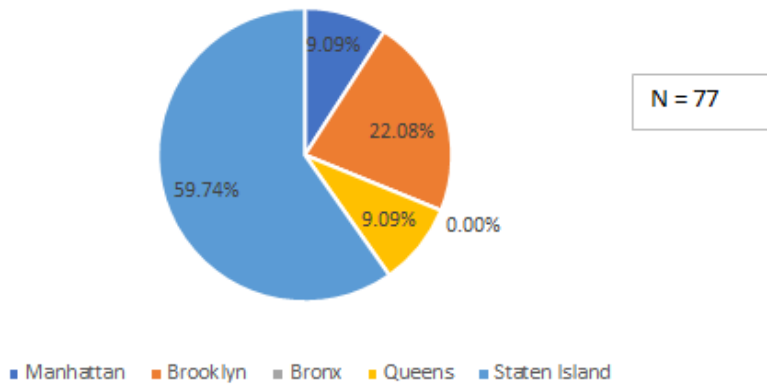


Figure 3.1. The majority of respondents are from Staten Island, New York.

Distribution by age

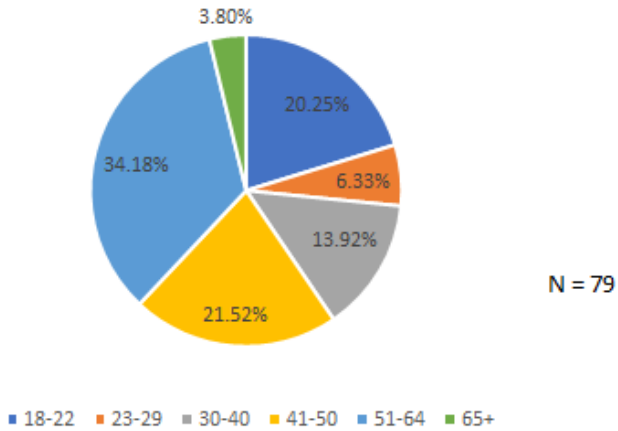


Figure 3.2. More than half of the respondents are between the ages of 41 and 64.

Distribution by race

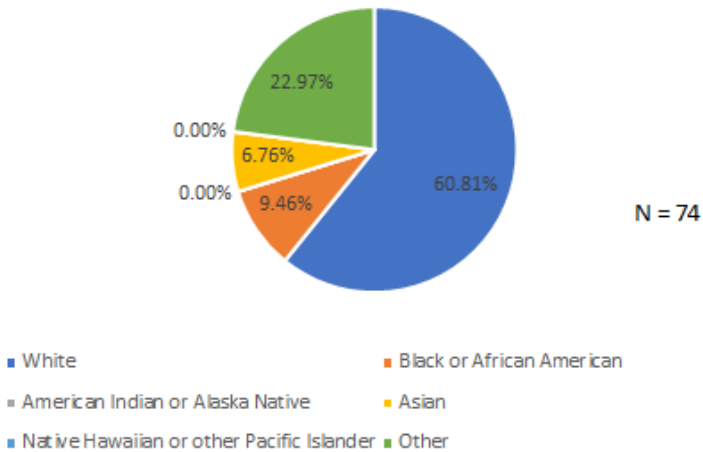


Figure 3.3. Because the U.S. Census Bureau has recently stopped including the Hispanic racial category and this survey uses the U.S. Census Bureau’s categories of race, more respondents may appear to be from the White and Other racial backgrounds than there actually are. Some Hispanics may have selected White as a race in the absence of a Hispanic option.

Distribution by level of education

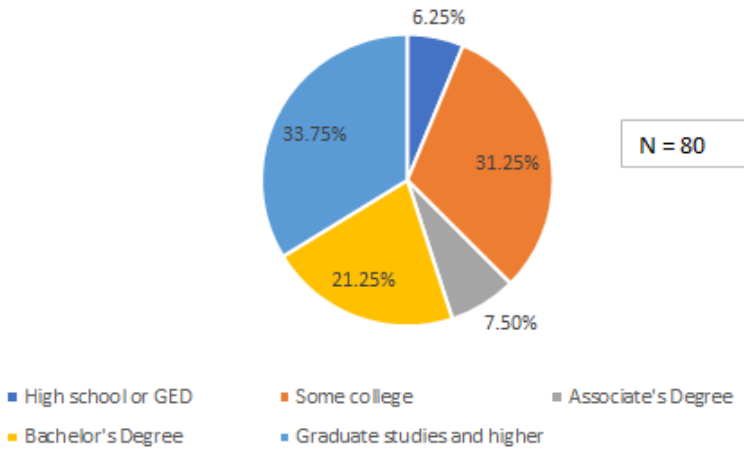


Figure 3.4. The majority of respondents have at least some college background. More than half of them have a Bachelor's Degree or higher.

Distribution by socioeconomic status

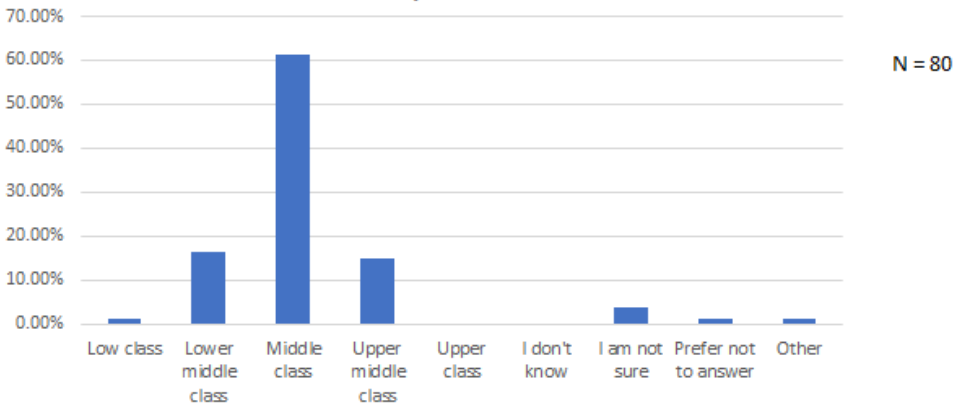


Figure 3.5. There may appear to be a larger majority of middle-class respondents than is the case, as most people identify as middle class, but may be from lower or upper middle classes.

Section III: Critical Essays

Finding Meaning in Silence: John Cage's 4'33"

Madeline Lee¹

John Cage, a twentieth-century composer, explored and innovated new methods of making music. As an avant-garde composer, he experimented with instrumentation and musical notation, pushing the boundaries of typical music in the 1900s. One of these experimental pieces is his 1952 work titled 4'33". Made up of three movements, this piece is not composed of notes and pitches, like a traditional piece of music, but with silence. 4'33" instructs the players not to play their instruments for the four minutes and thirty-three seconds referenced in the composition's title, letting the spontaneous sounds that occur in the environment fill the silence. As a non-traditional composition, 4'33" has sparked debate since its inception. This piece has not only been a topic of research and discussion for scholars of music but has also been debated by philosophers. Many people have debated whether it is music or not, evaluating the components of sound, duration, and the perception of the piece. Through his writings on silence and music, John Cage also adds his opinion regarding the musicality and perception of 4'33".

From its debut, 4'33" was controversial. It was first performed by David Tudor on August 29 1952, at Maverick Concert Hall, located in the Catskill Mountains in New Yorkⁱ. Many people prematurely left the concert before the piece was overⁱⁱ. The people who stayed also questioned the piece. "The Story of 4'33"," a radio program produced by National Public Radio, recounts this performance, stating that "[t]here was an uproar. People thought 4'33" was a joke or some kind of avant-garde nose-thumbing. During a post-concert discussion, as Cage biographer David Revill notes, one local artist stood up and suggested, 'Good people of Woodstock, let's drive these people out of town.'"ⁱⁱⁱ The initial reception of 4'33" was partially based on confusion and partially on anger. The composition is still regarded with these emotions. In a 2010 article, Alex Ross, a music critic for *The New Yorker*, writes:

Nearly six decades after the work came into the world, 4'33" is still dismissed as "absolutely ridiculous," "stupid," "a gimmick," and the "emperor's new clothes"—to quote some sample putdowns that [Kyle Gann, a scholar studying Cage,] extracted from an online comment board. Such judgments are especially common within

¹ Written under the direction of Dr. David Schulenberg for RFT-LC5.

classical music, where Cage, who died in 1992, remains an object of widespread scorn.^{iv}

The piece, for decades, has been the subject of criticism and confusion. In his 1961 book *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Cage addresses the criticism of *4'33"* and his other controversial works. He writes:

Question: I mean — But is this music? Answer: Ah! you like sounds after all when they are made up of vowels and consonants. You are slow-witted, for you have never brought your mind to the location of urgency. Do you need me or someone else to hold you up? Why don't you realize as I do that nothing is accomplished by writing, playing, or listening to music? Otherwise, deaf as a doornail, you will never be able to hear anything, even what's well within earshot.

Question: But, seriously, if this is what music is, I could write it as well as you.

Answer: Have I said anything that would lead you to think I thought you were stupid?^v

Though he appears to respond to the critics' questions, Cage does not actually provide a concrete answer to whether *4'33"* is music. He comments on the uselessness of playing, writing, and listening to music, but does not give any reasons why his compositions are music or not.

Scholars of philosophy and music have attempted to answer the question that Cage did not: Is *4'33"* music? To construct an effective argument, they must first define what music is. One of the most basic elements of music, at least from a Western perspective, is the inclusion of some sort of sound. The *Grove Music* article "Music" states that music is regarded as "a series of sounds and a group of compositions, and musical activity as consisting mainly of composition, expressed as the combining of sounds."^{vi} Sounds are essential for music. Though *4'33"* does not contain any notated sounds, it does use sound. In *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, John Cage states: "[I]n this new music nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment."^{vii} In Cage's opinion, *4'33"* actually contains a lot of sounds, because the silent nature of the piece highlights the environmental sounds. In this way, *4'33"* follows the definition of music as "a series of sounds," by allowing a space for these ambient noises, though they are not directly notated in the composition.

Though *4'33"* contains sounds, there is also a distinction between music and noise. In his TEDx Talk, Julian Dodd, a professor of philosophy at the University of Manchester, asserts that music must contain sounds that are produced by a performer who is following a

composer's instructions. He states that "if the sound is produced by a performer as a result of her following the composer's instructions, it's part of the performance's content. If it's not produced by that means, it's mere noise."^{viii} Through this lens, *4'33"* is not a musical composition but simply a series of ambient sounds, because they are not the product of a performer following a composer's score. However, other types of music also use sounds outside of the score. Improvisation is frequently heard in jazz music, among other types of music. The *Grove Music* article, "Improvisation," even asserts: "To some extent every performance involves elements of improvisation."^{ix} Music that includes improvisation is still, undeniably, music, although it is not a result of a performer following the score. This contradicts Dodd's argument that *4'33"* is not music purely because the sounds it contains are not a result of a performer heeding the composer's instructions. It is worth noting, however, that the sounds produced by jazz music and other types of improvisational music, are intentionally made by the performers, whereas the sounds in *4'33"* are not. This detracts from the argument that *4'33"* is music, because the function of the composer and the performers differs from their function in improvisational music—in *4'33"*, the performers simply let the ambient noise happen, while, in other types of improvisational music, they are directly responsible for creating it.

Sound is not the only element of music; duration is also one of its core tenets. The *Grove Music* article "Time" states: "The essential medium for music and musical performance, a non-spatial continuum of past, present and future in which music exists and is understood. Music requires no material substance, nor can one circumscribe any set of sounds as inherently musical (and others as inherently non-musical), but all music must occur in time."^x A composition must have some sort of duration to be considered music. Cage writes that "duration is the only characteristic of sound that is measurable in terms of silence, therefore any valid structure involving sounds and silences should be based, not as occidentally traditional, on frequency, but rightly on duration."^{xi} Whatever sounds it contains, *4'33"* has a duration. In an explanatory note connected with the piece, Cage writes: "the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time."^{xii} Whether it is played in a noisy or a quiet environment, it will be played for some amount of time, even if that duration is not specified.

Another important aspect of music is how it is perceived. *4'33"* is meant to be performed, and that should be taken into consideration when deciding whether or not it is music. In his book *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"*, Kyle Gann discusses how the performance aspect shapes the musical perception of *4'33"*. Gann, a composer and professor of music, writes:

Certainly, through the conventional and well-understood acts of placing the title of a composition on a program and arranging the audience in chairs facing a pianist, Cage was framing the sounds that the audience heard in an experimental attempt to make people perceive as art sounds that were not usually so perceived. One of the most common effects of 4'33"—possibly the most important and widespread effect—was to seduce people into considering as art phenomena that were normally not associated with art. Perhaps even more, its effect was to drive home the point that the difference between “art” and “non-art” is merely one of perception, and that we can control how we organize our perceptions.^{xiii}

Through the conventions of a musical performance—seating the audience in front of a performer and putting the title of the piece into a program—Cage frames 4'33" as music. According to Gann, framing the composition as music persuades the audience to think of it as music. The performance contains all of the things associated with a musical performance, so it must be one. Even if the sounds in 4'33" are spontaneous environmental noises, they are framed as part of a musical performance, so they are perceived as music.

Whether 4'33" is or is not considered to be music is a discussion that may never be resolved. Though it does contain sounds, has a duration, and is framed as music, there are still scholars who do not think it fulfills the criteria for music. However, perhaps it does not even matter whether it is music at all. In *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Cage writes:

One has a choice. If he does not wish to give up his attempts to control sound, he may complicate his musical technique towards an approximation of the new possibilities and awareness. ... Or, as before, one may give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments.^{xiv}

In this passage, Cage poses two possibilities: either control sound or allow it to just be sound. The latter choice almost rejects the idea that music exists at all. Though people impose human agendas or theories on certain sounds, all sounds are still simply sounds.

It may seem as if Cage's proposal of letting sounds just be sounds contradicts Gann's point about how the perception of sounds makes them music. However, in his book, Cage also writes about how letting sounds exist as sounds augments the individual perception of sounds. He states:

Hearing sounds which are just sounds immediately sets the theorizing mind to theorizing, and the emotions of human beings are continually aroused by encounters with nature. Does not a mountain unintentionally evoke in us a sense of wonder? Otters along a stream a sense of mirth? Night in the woods a sense of fear? Do not

rain falling and mists rising up suggest the love binding heaven and earth? Is not decaying flesh loathsome? Does not the death of someone we love bring sorrow? And is there a greater hero than the least plant that grows? What is more angry than the flash of lightning and the sound of thunder? These responses to nature are mine and will not necessarily correspond with another's. Emotion takes place in the person who has it. And sounds, when allowed to be themselves, do not require that those who hear them do so unfeelingly. The opposite is what is meant by response ability [sic].^{xv}

To Cage, letting sounds simply exist as sounds allows each person to find their own meaning and emotion in them. If something is categorized as music, it is no longer just a sound, but a specific type of sound that carries cultural and personal connotations, which could limit an individual's ability to find their own meaning in it.

Another thing to consider is Cage's intentions for and expectations of *4'33"*. The piece, at first glance, seems very open ended. He emphasizes not controlling sound through music. *4'33"*, by relying on spontaneous environmental sounds, allows any sound to fill the silence. However, Cage must have had some expectations for the piece. He probably would not have wanted the piece to be played in complete silence, without any ambient noise at all, because there would be no sound to focus on. Conversely, he also probably would not have wanted it to be performed right next to another performance, because that would detract from the focus on the spontaneous environmental sounds. Therefore, since Cage probably had some idea of how *4'33"* should be performed, he set expectations of what the piece—and music as a whole—should be.

Perhaps Cage did not mean for *4'33"* to be taken seriously at all. His process of composition, and, as a result, many of his pieces, seems almost theatrical. For example, Cage developed a "gamut" technique for composing, in which he used only a certain set of unrelated sonorities.^{xvi} Limiting himself to these sounds makes his process of composition seem theatrical, as if he is seeking attention through his process, rather than through the merit of the pieces themselves. The very nature of *4'33"* also has a satirical quality. The whole concept of composing an entirely silent piece seems to mock music, because it contradicts the conventional definition of music. Perhaps it was meant to spark debate among scholars, making them realize how trivial their concept of music is.

The musicality of *4'33"* has been debated for decades, starting with the first public performance of the piece. Though the composition fulfills the criteria of having some sort of sound, a duration, and the conventions of a musical performance, defining music is a messy and somewhat subjective task. Because of this, the discussion of whether or not the piece is music may never be closed. To some, the spontaneous environmental sounds highlighted in

4'33" are music. To others, they are just noise. However, trying to define it at all goes against Cage's philosophy and intentions for the piece. He believed that sounds should just be sounds because this allows listeners to find individual significance in them. Labeling a sound as music puts it into a special category of sounds, foisting the connotations of that label onto a sound. However, he contradicted this by placing expectations on the performance of the piece, further confounding the musicality of 4'33". Perhaps the debate should no longer be about whether 4'33" is music or not, but whether being music even matters.

ⁱ Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1.

ⁱⁱ Alex Ross, "Searching for Silence," *The New Yorker* 86 (4 October 2010): para. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Will Hermes, "The Story Of '4'33'," *NPR* (8 May 2000), 5:47. <https://www.npr.org/2000/05/08/1073885/4-33>

^{iv} Ross, "Searching for Silence," para. 5.

^v John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 17.

^{vi} Bruno Nettle, "Music," *Grove Music Online* (accessed 3 November 2020), <https://ezproxy.wagner.edu:2310/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40476>, section I (2)

^{vii} Cage, *Silence*, 7-8.

^{viii} Julian Dodd, "Is John Cage's 4'33" music? Prof. Julian Dodd at TEDxUniveristyOf Manchester", YouTube, uploaded by TEDx Talks (2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTCVnKROlos>, 11:28.

^{ix} Bruno Nettle et al., "Improvisation," *Grove Music Online* (accessed 3 November 2020), <https://ezproxy.wagner.edu:2310/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.13738>.

^x Justin London, "Time," *Grove Music Online* (accessed 3 November 2020), <https://ezproxy.wagner.edu:2310/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.43935>.

^{xi} Cage, *Silence*, 13.

^{xii} Quoted in Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 183.

^{xiii} Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 20.

^{xiv} Cage, *Silence*, 10.

^{xv} Cage, *Silence*, 10.

^{xvi} Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 169.

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Nina Simone's Curse on the Nation: "Mississippi Goddam"

Julia Searle (Business Administration)¹

In her 1963 protest song, "Mississippi Goddam," Nina Simone proclaims, "All I want is equality/For my sister, my brother, my people, and me." Simone, a talented African American singer and pianist, wrote what would be called the "national anthem of the Civil Rights movement" (Raussert 23). The early 60s were the period in the Civil Rights movement where tensions were skyrocketing and people were running out of patience due to the lack of tangible progress. Simone's song essentially documents the escalation of events in the early part of 1963 that eventually led to the Civil Rights Act being signed in 1964. Prior to this time, protest songs were typically "sung to bolster spirits, to gain new courage and to increase the sense of unity" (Feldstein 1377). In "Mississippi Goddam," Simone takes a very different and defiant approach; she provokes her audience with an energetic tone and demands them to grasp the song's message. She repeatedly calls out the places where terrible events had occurred earlier that year. Her verses go on to predict that the tragedies would continue if no change was implemented. I argue that Simone fearlessly exposes the rising violence that was being used to subvert the progress of the Civil Rights Movement. She leveraged her position as a vibrant and popular performer to drive the song's explicit title and evocative lyrics into the consciousness of her audience. The song "Mississippi Goddam" signals a breaking point in the Civil Rights movement because it openly criticized the unrestrained and uncontested violence being used by white segregationists to maintain the oppression of African Americans. Her song embodies the anger, fear, and resentment that Black Americans felt in response to these events and encourages them to defy discrimination.

In order to understand Simone's message, it's important to look back through America's past. The Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery in 1863, however, the true equality that African Americans sought was still a long ways off in 1963. Within fifteen years following the Civil War, "Jim Crow Laws" were enacted, legalizing racial segregation in places of work, education, housing and stores in the U.S. from 1877 until 1964. As Katie Eyer argues, "'colorblind' Jim Crow laws and administrative action (in other words, legal action intended to reach racial results through means that were not facially discriminatory) were also an important piece of how inequality was sustained"

¹ Written under the direction of Dr. Alison Arant for RFT-LC 5.

(Eyer 1033). These laws were simply a disguised continuation of the suppression of African American rights and opportunities. According to Roy Wilkins, the assistant secretary for the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), “African Americans were not demanding anything ‘new or startling’... nor were they asking for anything ‘inconsistent with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights’” (Snyder 152). They wanted to exercise the rights they were granted as Americans and be offered the same opportunities in the same environments as white people.

The fight for equality continued throughout the Civil Rights Movement, from 1954 to 1968, but it was in early 1963, the year Simone wrote “Mississippi Goddam,” that the cause started to gain real momentum. In April of that year, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested in Alabama after “bringing other activists to Birmingham for a direct challenge to the city’s segregation policies” (Cohodas 136) because “there [had] been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation” (Harmon 3). In June 1963, President Kennedy brought these issues to the attention of the nation in his “Address on Civil Rights.” Kennedy stated, “One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet free from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression” (Kennedy 5:08 - 5:26). Then, in August 1963, the march on Washington D.C., “the largest political demonstration to date in American history,” took place and Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” (Cohodas 142). Resistance and protests were mounting, public opinion was turning and real change was on the horizon.

Nina Simone was a popular entertainer who had heard about everything that was going on, but had not yet become directly involved in the fight for equality. When President Kennedy gave his speech on Civil Rights, stating that equality was overdue, Simone had hope for a better future (Cohodas 138). About two hours after his speech however, Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers was murdered in front of his home (Cohodas 138). As Keith Orejel wrote in his essay, “Evers was a hero within African American activist circles, but also a target for militant white segregationists” (Orejel 37). While Simone simply watched and listened, people like Medgar Evers were out risking their lives to fight for equality. Simone recalled, “Evers’ murder was not the last straw for me, but it was the match that lit the fuse” (Cohodas 138). His death was a catalyst and sent a clear message to all Americans about the price of speaking out against oppression. According to Orejel, “Violent protests erupted in Jackson in the days following Evers’ murder... tens of thousands of Americans joined in NAACP organized meetings to honor the civil rights martyr” (Orejel 39). People were outraged and terrified. How many more

people were going to die fighting for basic human rights? As Martin Luther King stated in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (Harmon 3).

The violence and tragedy reached a new low in September 1963 when four young African American girls were killed while at church in a bombing planned by white segregationists. Hearing the news jolted Nina Simone’s conscience and catapulted her from the sidelines into the fight. “Simone recalled, ‘All the truths that I had denied to myself for so long rose up and slapped my face.’ The church bombing and the slaying of Medgar Evers now fit like the last pieces of a jigsaw puzzle... ‘I suddenly realized what it is to be black in America in 1963’” (Cohodas 144). The death of innocent children was the last straw for Simone and awakened her to the magnitude of the fight and the true power of hatred. In that moment, the fury that had been growing in her exploded and she immediately sat down and wrote “Mississippi Goddam” (Feldstein 1349). Simone states in her song, “Black cats cross my path/I think every day's gonna be my last.” She realized that being Black in the U.S. meant not only being regarded as a second-class citizen, but that to some, your life had no value. Her song was a wake-up call “addressed precisely to those who [were] numb and sleeping through the tyranny of history, the assassination of NAACP field secretaries, and church bombings that murder little girls; they [were] deaf, dumb, and blind, Simone's song asserts, to the American catastrophe at hand” (Brooks 187). She called out people watching these tragic events unfold, seeing the lack of consequences, and still not acting, just as she had done. Simone knew the best way to make a difference was through her music. This song sparked her motivation for activism and she was eager to ignite that spark in others.

Prior to writing “Mississippi Goddam,” Simone had been merely watching the events unfold around her; she was not even present at the march in Washington D.C. Simone “was on the sidelines, not recognizing yet that she had a part to play in the emerging struggle... She was certainly aware of all that was going on... but she hadn’t made the effort to put it all together for herself” (Cohodas 136). Simone was so inspired and determined to do more that she eventually became an activist for the movement. She “performed [‘Mississippi Goddam’] in Atlanta and for marchers during the Selma-to-Montgomery march in 1965” (Feldstein 1361). According to Cohodas, Simone “felt as if she had hurled ‘ten bullets’ back at the Birmingham bombers” (Cohodas 145). She felt she was creating change with her lyrics. Music gave her power and an outlet to express her rage and urge people to understand the meaning behind it.

Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” signaled a breaking point for people during this intense period because it was incredibly expressive and compelling. The song’s explicit

title, “Mississippi Goddam,” grabbed people’s attention and sparked controversy. The word “goddam” was not just in the title, but was boldly repeated throughout the song. Simone evidently used the shock value of being unapologetically profane in order to express the outrage she and other African Americans felt at the time. As Daphne Brooks argues, “Simone’s singing curse grants her access to aggression with a score; it allows her to be ‘symbolically violent’ and to ‘achieve [her] purpose without breaking the prohibition on actual bodily harm’” (Brooks 188). As a result of the profanity and underlying message, “‘Mississippi Goddam’ was banned from radio stations in the South and from national television” (Feldstein 1368). Some have argued that the song was too controversial for its time because Simone was literally cursing the nation. While it was controversial to use profanity, it was appropriate given the atrocities she was commenting on. Fearlessly performing this song put both Simone’s safety and career at risk. However, she felt she had an obligation to express how fed-up African Americans were at this point. In an interview, Simone stated, “I choose to reflect the times and the situations in which I find myself. That, to me, is my duty... and at this crucial time in our lives, when everything is so desperate, when every day is a matter of survival, I don’t think you can help but be involved... How can you be an artist and not reflect the times?” (*What Happened* 54:22 - 53:51). As an entertainer, Simone knew she had not only the capability, but the responsibility to persevere and try to make a difference.

Simone’s lyrics directly comment on the steady stream of violence during 1963 that was aimed to thwart the resistance of African Americans. Simone protested the violence by essentially ticking off the places where terrible events had occurred with no legal repercussion. “Alabama’s gotten me so upset/Tennessee made me lose my rest/And everybody knows about Mississippi, goddamn.” These powerful, expressive lyrics are repeated as the chorus of the song; they expose the recurring violence and underscore the fact that African Americans were sick of it. Simone was the “spokeswoman when it came to that earthy ‘let’s drag it up by the roots’ sort of stuff. She tells the TRUTH” (Cohodas 146). Simone was defiant in her lyrics, “‘Don’t tell me, I’ll tell you/Me and my people just about due.” She “delivers the sonic equivalent of African Americans’ utter discontent living under quotidian Jim Crow subjugation” (Brooks 184). Simone amplified the indignation Black Americans felt in response to the decades of systemic racism.

“Mississippi Goddam” was a protest song, but not in the conventional sense because its aim was to strike notes of shock and outrage rather than emphasizing harmony and solidarity. Simone expresses the fact that African Americans were no longer willing to tolerate the legalized segregation and oppression that the power structure had maintained for decades. Simone sings, “Washing the windows/Do it

slow/Picking the cotton/Do it slow.” She refers to the fact that African Americans were left with only the menial, low paying jobs as a result of segregation. “Simone interfaces arduous black labor - ‘washing the windows, picking the cotton’ - with the ironic voices of white supremacist hypocrisy (‘you’re just plain rotten!’ ‘you’re too damn lazy!’) with the ‘Do it slow’ chant yelled in the background by her band” (Brooks 187). Her lyrics illustrate that the people who were criticizing Blacks for being too lazy, or too rotten, to get a better job were the same people restricting their opportunities. The verses unmask the negative stereotypes associated with African Americans as well as the hypocrisy and racist tactics that whites were employing in order to hinder progress.

Her verses claim that slowing the movement would ultimately result in more violence. Simone strategically repeats the refrain “Do it slow!” throughout the song to reiterate the fact that many in power supported maintaining segregation and reinforcing methods of oppression; her lyrics exposed the passive resistance against the movement. She sings, “Do things gradually/Do it slow/But bring more tragedy.” The song argues that if change was dragged out, more lives would be lost. As Brooks argues, “‘Do[ing] it slow’ is both a mark of resistance and a failure on the part of movement leaders to face the time bomb that keeps ticking (off) in the race against Civil Rights era white supremacist terror” (Brooks 187). If legal change was not implemented soon, then more tragedy would occur. “Simone and her band effectively check the tempo of the nation, calling attention to the historically glacial pace of this country’s racial reform even as the galloping, staccato rhythm section marches forward and forecasts the nation’s impending damnation” (Brooks 187). Equality had to be instituted as Black Americans are entitled to the same rights and opportunities as whites. Her song signaled for meaningful change to be instituted and enforced to end the violence and subjugation.

In order to effectively relay the message in her lyrics, Simone presented her song in an upbeat and energetic manner. She grasped her audience’s attention with a quick, lively tempo and proceeded to proclaim her exposition of the occurring injustice. The lyrics are a litany of rage and aggression, “Simone wields audience pater on ‘Mississippi Goddam’ as a disciplinary, metanarrative threat” (Brooks 184). Simone’s performance of this gritty, angry protest song had to be presented in a stimulating and entertaining manner in order for the message to truly resonate with her audience. “The euphoria of the song’s tempo and Simone’s near ebullient introduction sets a sly trap for the audience who, with their robust laughter, is seduced into a suspended state of disbelief as to the dire seriousness of the song’s subject matter” (Brooks 184). Due to the references to tragedy and violence in the song, some people may argue that the tone and tempo of Simone’s delivery were inappropriate, “but mellow is never a natural mood for

Miss Simone" (Wilson). On the one hand, it is reasonable to say that the upbeat tone of the song is inappropriate for the subject matter. On the other hand, in order for Simone's message to truly reach her audience, she needed to deliver the subject matter in an appealing way. Without this jaunty tempo, the song would not have been as influential and effective.

Simone performed "Mississippi Goddam" in front of both Black and white audiences in order to cast her net as wide as possible. Simone was dedicated to the movement and tenacious in making her message known. According to Feldstein, "In 1964, [Simone] headlined for SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee] several times in just a few months, including an event at Carnegie Hall that added to her reputation as a musician worthy of that location and as committed to the movement" (Feldstein 1360). She employed this strategy with her use of the word "everybody." When referencing Evers' murder in Mississippi, she sings, "Everybody knows about Mississippi," addressing her entire audience. Many Americans were aware of the violence that was occurring at the time; it was common knowledge that Evers was murdered because he spoke out and was fighting for change. By using "everybody," Simone, "interpolates her own audience into the doomed collective of the song itself, the blind men and women who are unable to recognize the rebellion as it unfolds before their very ears" (Brooks 184). She called out everyone in her audience who had yet to accept that racism and violence affected the entire nation, Blacks and whites. "Simone here plays out the triple rift between what 'everybody knows,' what no one but her will say... what she prophetically reads in her jeremiad moments as the fire, brimstone, and locust future at which the nation is hurling" (Brooks 187). Simone made it clear that African Americans were ready to respond to violence with violence. She called out her audience again, singing, "Can't you see it/Can't you feel it?" challenging them to pick a side. Simone was trying to "'awaken' her audience to history" (Brooks 186).

This song proved pivotal because it marked a change in the tone and temperament of the Civil Rights Movement. "'Mississippi Goddam' remains one of the most powerful pop music protest songs of the Civil Rights era" (Brooks 182). It signaled a breaking point during the Civil Rights movement because Simone's fearless commentary, along with her captivating performances, forced people to reflect on the state of the nation. Her position as a popular entertainer and the musical strategies she used to awaken her audience, warned people that reform was coming. Simone put her audience on notice that continued violence would fuel, rather than suppress the movement. Change was inevitable, and in the years following Simone's composition of the song, the Civil Rights Act was instituted in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act was

established in 1965. This song was a tipping point at the height of the Civil Rights movement because it embodied African Americans' rage in response to decades of unchecked violence and legalized discrimination, and forced the rest of America to acknowledge the inhumanity of it all.

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Nazi Newspapers and Radio Propaganda in Pre-War Germany and Romania

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In memory of my grandfather,
I hope you are proud of me.

Personal Note: I will always feel that this research paper is incomplete, as I have not gotten the chance to find out about another Romanian newspaper controlled by the Nazis. While I thought I had plenty of time to hear grandfather's stories, he flew to a better place. I dedicate this to him, the man who instilled in me the morals and values I will forever carry.

In one of his speeches to the Nazi Party, Joseph Goebbels (head of the Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda) encouraged the population to "Think of the press as a great keyboard on which the government can play." (Goebbels' Speech, The Olympics of 1936). In Nazi Germany, those in power frequently used propaganda to sell a racist view of the world that divided people between "us" and "them." The purpose of the Nazis was to create a "*Volksgemeinschaft*", meaning a social order of "healthy" and "pure racial" Germans that would overcome class struggle and social conflicts. The Nazis made full use of all the means at their disposal: election posters, statistics, radio, rental of high-performance means of transportation, so that Hitler could travel to the scene whenever needed to give his speeches. Goebbels fully controlled the information that was broadcast, whether in written, spoken, sung, or filmed form. In Romania, Nazi propaganda appeared at once with the arrival of World War II. With Ion Antonescu's (Romanian military officer prime minister during most of World War II) ascension to power, the relationship between Germany and Romania warmed considerably.

As we examine the chronology of the evolution of Nazi Propaganda in newspapers and radio, both in general and specifically in Romania, it becomes vital to understand its purpose, target and evolution. To this end, this paper will analyze the fundamental tenets of Nazi propaganda in newspapers and radios, especially focusing on "*The Völkisher Beobachter*", "*Der Stürmer*", and "*Volksempfänger*". In the second part, this paper will provide an overview of how Nazis controlled Romania and the political relationship between Adolf

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Hitler and Ion Antonescu. To this extent, the second part will provide a historical content of Romania's interests and background beginning with the 1940's and will lay out the propaganda not only through "*Memoria Cartii Postale*" (Postcard Memory), "*Porunca Vremii*" (Time's Word) and "*Cuvantul*" (The Word), but also through radio. Throughout the analysis provided, the thesis will raise the question: "How did the Nazi Party use newspapers and radios to indoctrinate the populations of pre-war Germany and Romania?"

Part I: Propaganda through Newspapers and Radio in Pre-war Nazi Germany

Reflecting in his diary during the war, Joseph Goebbels wrote: "Any man who still has a residue of honor will be careful not to become a journalist". Shortly after taking power in January 1933, Adolf Hitler and his party succeeded in destroying Germany's diverse newspaper and radio culture. The Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda eliminated freedom of the press, shutting down oppositional newspapers and all press under the Reich Chamber of Culture (RKK). The Nazi regime also deployed the radio press, as they considered the radio to be the most modern and the most effective instrument for influencing the masses of Germany. At that time, radios were cheap to buy and would broadcast Nazi Party messages and speeches.

"*Völkischer Beobachter*", translated as "The People's Observer" was the main official newspaper of the Nazi Party. Its primary aim was to spread the word of Nazism and to print the propaganda requirements of Joseph Goebbels. The production of "*Völkischer Beobachter*" ended when Nazi Germany collapsed in May 1945. As Roland Layton states, the newspaper was a "debt-ridden" (353) one. After raising enough money to keep the paper going, party leader and ideologist Alfred Rosenberg, the first editor, convinced Hitler to convert it into a daily newspaper and to adopt a larger format. Layton explains further that the purpose of converting it into a larger format was "indeed a distinction, since the VB now had an eye-catching quality" (357). The Nazis completed its external appearance, as seen in figure 1, transforming it into an eye-catching newspaper, with Nazi symbols and indoctrinations. With all these improvements, "*Völkischer Beobachter*" fulfilled the Nazis' expectations: to present the Party's ideological views, to print news of Party activities and –to be "a combat organ and spokesman for the movement." (Hale, 37). To sum up, Layton outlines the idea that "the VB was a major weapon in Hitler's propaganda arsenal". Even though the VB and "Der Angriff" (another Nazi newspaper founded by Goebbels in 1927) fawningly supported Hitler and National Socialism and pushed Nazi ideas, some individual Nazis were allowed to produce their own newspapers. This was quite an unusual thing, as Goebbels wanted people only to read the news as it was presented by the government.

"*Der Stürmer*" was probably the most infamous newspaper, directed by the anti-Semite Julius Streicher, who himself claimed that this newspaper was Hitler's favorite read. Even though it was not that popular, Streicher had known exactly how to gain people's trust

by falsely denigrating Jews during the interwar period in Germany. Figure 2 shows an example of anti-Semitic propaganda as the front page features a caricature of a Jewish man playing the flute, surrounded by a dollar sign and the communist sickle and hammer. After the power of Streicher's antisemitic "career", "*Der Stürmer*" became "a Reich-wide mass phenomenon that was sold abroad [...] and Streicher's name soon became [...] the vilest form of antisemitism." (Hermann, 323).

To sum up, Nazi Germany's propaganda in newspapers succeeded in taking control and exerting influence over independent press organs. Reinforcing the myth of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (National Community) through visual and written elements, the newspaper propaganda meant a mass dissemination of their ideological messages, such as antisemitism, extreme nationalism and scientific racism. With this politically extreme approach, the party believed in overcoming the social divisions and creating a homogenous German society based on racial purity.

Another way the Nazi Party promoted propaganda was through radio. The Nazis understood the power and attraction of emerging technologies such as radio, in the service of propaganda. Radio was also censored in the same way as newspapers (RKK). Goebbels and the Nazis controlled all output on them and made sure all Germans had access. They created cheap radios which were sold to Germans in order that they could hear the Nazi messages and indoctrination everywhere. Furthermore, they placed loudspeakers in public places so that no matter where they were, everyone would hear the Nazi propaganda over the airwaves. Seeing the tremendous promise of radio for propaganda, the ministry heavily subsidized the creation of the inexpensive "People's Radio" (*Volksempfänger*) to facilitate sales. The Nazis developed "People's Radio" after Goebbels realized its importance. As Bergmeier and Lotz point out, the political nature of this German radio was that "every German household could receive its programs" (8). They explain further that "the prototype model was the VE 301 [...], commemorating the date Hitler came to power in 1933" (Bergmeier & Linz, 9). Of course, even the production and sale of this radio had a political propagandistic role in the Third Reich. While in other countries radios would be sold on their design, price and sound, the basic "*Volksempfänger*" was used as a propaganda tool. Figure 3 shows a popular advertisement for the radio captioning a Nuremberg rally style crowd standing around a photograph of a *Volksempfänger* with the slogan, "The whole Germany hears the Führer with the *Volksempfänger*".

Over the next years, the Nazis improved the radio's version, thus becoming a tremendous propaganda success, having access to the entire population at any given moment. According to Adena's "Analysis of the Radio's Rise" in 1934, 33.3% of German house-holds had a radio set" (Adena, 1898). Furthermore, she goes deeper into the analysis of the number of radio subscriptions and one finds out that the monthly subscription fee was "2 marks [...] equivalent to the price of a monthly newspaper subscription" (Adena, 1899). This exactly

reveals the Nazis' purpose: to create affordable subscriptions which were sold to Germans in order that they could hear the Nazi propaganda messages at home.

Hitler, and even more so Goebbels, saw the massive propaganda weapon radio that had become. They wanted to make sure that "Things must be open and clear to the world" (Hadamovsky, 26). In his thesis about the effective use of radio for political purposes, the leading Nazi radio expert Eugen Hadamovsky explains further in his work how the party made sure to mobilize the whole population for certain international goals and to indoctrinate them politically. Even when hearing the news, they became not more interested in literature, symphonies or plays; yet, they were attracted by "political radio" (Hadamovsky, 27).

From newspapers to radio, propaganda in pre-war Nazi Germany was a hurricane that brainwashed all the population in just a few years. As our findings suggest, the Führer's voice was everywhere, so that we can conclude that mass media played an important role in the process of institutional change. In particular, the dictatorial rule the Nazis promoted through propaganda in newspapers and radio contributed to its stability and Hitler's popularity during his reign.

Part II: Mass-Media Nazi propaganda in Romania during Ion Antonescu's regime Historic Background:

In the years of Nazi Germany's domination over Romania and of Antonescu's totalitarian regime, propaganda evolved in direct relationship with the evolution of the state of the mind of the masses, with the political and military changes occurring internationally. In late June 1940, the Soviet Union demanded from Romania the cession of both Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. The only advice Germany could give to the Romanian government was to agree to surrender the territory. Fearful of further Soviet encroachments, the Romanian government made a series of pleas to Germany including a personal appeal from King Carol II to Hitler for German military assistance in the summer of 1940. Hitler, however, was not yet willing to undertake such a step. Thus, all Romanian requests were rebuffed with Hitler telling Carol that Romania brought its own problems upon itself by its prior pro-Allied policy. Hitler also urged the Romanian government to settle its problems with Hungary peaceably. With Antonescu's ascension to power, the relationship between Germany and Romania warmed considerably. Antonescu began by promising closer collaboration with Germany. He also renewed the request for German military assistance, with the idea of having Germans train and reorganize the Romanian army. This time, Hitler agreed and on September 19, 1940, he decided to send a military mission to Romania. Greater Romania suddenly became very small with the loss of northern Transylvania in favor of Hungary, Bessarabia, and Bukovina in favor of the USSR and the Quadrilateral in favor of Bulgaria; the all-powerful allies and traditional guarantors had either been humiliatingly defeated (France) or were in great difficulty (Great Britain); the troops of the German military mission had entered the country which had

changed its leader and political regime overnight (September 6, 1940). Nothing was the same as before. Even in these conditions of general upheaval it was not at all easy for German propaganda to win, if not sympathy, then at least the neutrality of public opinion in the country. Although General Ion Antonescu did not stop sending insistent and pathetic messages to the Romanian nation about the confidence and support he enjoyed from the "Great Führer", "Romanians continued to listen to the BBC, being more willing to believe Churchill than Hitler". (Hentea, 265)

Under these conditions, one of the main objectives of German propaganda in Romania was to counteract the British one, in order to prevent a detachment from the Axis Powers. Therefore, the situation of Great Britain was constantly and exaggeratedly presented as catastrophic, simultaneously with the exaltation of the German victories. Figure 4 shows a propaganda poster, indoctrinating the Romanian population to truly believe in the power of Germany. One observes the removal of Great Britain from Europa, and the hen depicted as "Mama Europa" (Mother Europe) who keeps all the other European countries under her wing.

"*Memoria Cartii Postale*" (Postcard Memory) was the use of postcards created as a means of propaganda during armed conflicts, beginning with 1940. During military conflicts, the states issued such tools, which they provided free of charge to the military to facilitate correspondence with relatives at home. That is what happened in Romania, too. The experience of military conflicts has shown that this postal tool is a simple and handy means of propaganda for both the military on the front and for relatives at home. Carefully studying these postal tools, we found that they were meant to appeal to the soldier; the national symbol of the state - the coat of arms, a place of application of the military censor's visa, the postage stamp, the addresses of the recipient and the sender, a significant picture and a strong message. If these postal items bore the visa of the military censor, it is understood that the sender could not write anything he or she wanted. The message from Figure 5 sent from the battle front can be translated: "You need to know that I am healthy. The war lasts a little longer, the enemy will be defeated, we will see each other happy at home soon!" (Postcard Memory, 1941). It is deduced that the message written by the soldier did not suit the military censor, and therefore the postal item was stopped from being sent.

Figure 6 and 7 help us to understand the influence of Nazi Germany in Romania. One notices in the two images the meeting between Adolf Hitler and Ion Antonescu (November 1940 and June 1942), set for discussing "the Jewish problem, or the treatment of the Jews" (Lorman, 240). In Romania, there was no reason for conflict or a cause of disagreement between Germany and the National Legionary Government. This had no impact on the attitude of Nazi Germany towards the leaders of the Romanian legionary regime. At first, Berlin viewed the legionary offensive against Jewish property or the Jews themselves as one aspect of the fascist revolution in Romania, similar to that taking place in Germany. "The close brotherhood of German-Romanian arms on the battlefields of the East has thus borne

fruit, of which we will always be proud"(Figure 6, Postcard Memory) "I can assure you today that I return with the confidence of the Führer and the German people" (Figure 7, Postcard Memory). The depth of the messages written on these postcards is impressive and helps us understand that these messages reached the heart of the soldier and his relatives.

What was required of the Romanian press from January 1, 1938 to August 23, 1944 was, first, "ideological unity" (Lorman, 240). Newspapers and most magazines of that time had, at least when addressing domestic and international political issues, the same opinion, the same vision, the same beliefs. The plurality of voices, even if unequal, that characterized the previous period fades with the beginning of 1938, replaced by a single voice. It is the voice, already understood, of the political regime-Goga's government first, then of the royal dictatorship, then of Ion Antonescu's governments. The Romanian press of the time was invaded, especially after June 1941, by the noisy and mechanical rhetoric of the Axis as the "defender of Europe". Phrases such as "holy war", "crusade", "victory of the Cross" are found everywhere, these being considered defining for the "European spirit" and for the notion of "Europe" (Lorman, 241). The decisive role that Romania plays in the history of the old continent becomes an obsessive topic of newspapers and magazines.

All along its antifascist and antiwar propaganda activity, the Romanian Communist Party published over thirty legal and clandestine newspapers. Some of the anti-Semitic propaganda publications in Romania were funded by the German Embassy in Bucharest by bribing journalists from various newspapers, as well as by providing financial support for the two anti-Semitic parties, Octavian Goga's Christian National Party and A.C. Cuza and the Iron Guard.

Porunca Vremii, one of the leading Iron Guard newspapers in Romania and also the semi-official newspaper of the anti-Semitic movement, noted on August 15, 1940 that "any attempt to consolidate Romania will fail as long as the Jewish problem in Romania is not solved." (Sima, 80). According to the Nazi model, the solution involved "firm repression" (*Porunca Vremii*, Figure 8) and expulsion of Jews from Romania. This is just one example of hundreds of newspaper articles of this kind.

The Legionnaires believed, and were not entirely wrong, that their movement had the full support of the Nazis and that the Reich's guarantees on Romania's crumbling borders after June-August 1940 would be ensured by the existence of a fascist regime in Romania. On the last day of the rebellion (January 23, 1941), when the Romanian army killed the armed legionnaires, *Cuvântul*, their semi-official newspaper, warned Antonescu that the destruction of the legionary movement would threaten the very existence and sovereignty of the Romanian state: "Only existence in Romania of a national movement similar to the National Socialists and fascists guarantees us the future." It seemed that in the conception of Hitler and the Nazis, Romania could not be led in opposition to the Iron Guard. In January 1941, during the battle between Antonescu and the Iron Guard, the Führer was forced to choose between

two potential Reich partners. Although the Iron Guard was the ideological counterpart of Nazi Germany, Hitler favored Antonescu because he exercised firm control over the army and maintained the economic commitments he had made to the Reich. At his meeting with Antonescu on January 14, 1941, Hitler gave him a free hand to crush the legionaries. On January 24, when he still did not know that the fight had already been decided, Goebbels wrote in his diary: "In Romania, nothing is clear yet. The legionaries continued their revolt, and Antonescu ordered them to be shot. The Führer, for his part, says he wants an agreement with a state, not an ideology. However, my heart is with them" (Sima, 81).

Both through postcards and through newspapers that promoted the Führer's ideology, the Nazis intoxicated Romania, having an enormous influence in the minds of the population. Yet with the exception of *Volkempfänger*, there was no specific radio station in Romania to promote Nazi propaganda. Also, unlike the multitude of existing newspapers in Romania that promoted Nazi ideologies, the radio was not infested with the transmission of messages promoting the Führer. Instead, the Nazis understood the influence of the only existing radio station in Romania at that time, *Radio Romania International*. Although the station was functioning on the premises of the Electrotechnical Institute and was not an official one, its programs actually targeted listeners abroad as well and - quite importantly - it had the technical capability to reach them. Although the station was functioning on the premises of the Electrotechnical Institute and was not an official one, its targeted listeners were suddenly brainwashed by the Nazis' simple propaganda. However, the propaganda was hidden behind the programs promoted. They were a kind of review of the latest developments in Romania, of political, cultural, economic and sports news, but focusing more on the cultural side. However, the first formal broadcasts in foreign languages of the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Corporation (SRR) were conceived in the early 1930s, in order to inform the diplomatic corps in the Romanian capital city. Ion Agrigoaiei makes the following remarks in his first volume devoted to the history of SRR: "The first broadcasts of this kind started in 1932, namely Newsreels in French and English, aired before the end of the program, a quarter of an hour before midnight. Before the end of the daily programs in Romanian, the so-called "miniature talk-shows" (Agrigoaiei, 113) were broadcast, which referred to specific Romanian life, as a document of our archives says. They provided brief information in French and German about "the wealth, economy, culture and creations of Romania" (Agrigoaiei, 114).

The outbreak of World War II brought about a growth and diversification of the information broadcast from Romania in foreign languages to audiences abroad. So, besides broadcasts in French, English, German and Italian, programs in Greek, Turkish, Serbian, Russian and later Ukrainian were introduced. Programs were, obviously, highly propagandistic during the war, serving Romania's military and political purposes together with those of the Axis and, implicitly, Germany.

On August 23rd 1944, when Romania joined the Allied Powers, a new station was inaugurated. 'Roman Dacia' radio station was broadcasting in 5 languages: English, Russian, French, Hungarian and German. The war had not come to an end. The Roman Dacia Board decided to serve the cause of Romania's integration into the United Nations Organisation and to promote Romania's economic reconstruction and democratisation process. The German Service enjoyed, throughout these years, the collaboration of personalities of great repute: German speaking poets Alfred Margul Sperber and Franz Johannes Bulhart, actress Margot Goettling, who graduated from the Drama Institute in Vienna, exceptional radio presenters and hosts: Ingrid Kloos, Heidemarie Papp, Otto Schneider, Erwin Sacher or Ilse Borcea, as well as talented journalists, such as Richard Lang and Juergen Salzer.

To sum up, even though the Nazis didn't "invade" Romanians' brains in the same way they abolished civil rights and destroyed the German democracy, it was enough to indoctrinate the Romanian population to believe in the glorifying power of Adolf Hitler and his regime. By sending postcards to the soldiers' families with powerful messages, promoting their main objectives of creating a strong community based on the Führer's trust in the newspapers and shadowing the political interests by advocating for culture, the Nazis won Romania's trust before and during WW2.

Appendix



{Figure 1}



{Figure 2}



{Figure 3}



{Figure 4}



{Figure 5}



Strânsa frăjie de arme germâno-română călăie pe câmpurile de luptă din Est, și-a dat astfel roadele, cu care ne vom mândri totdeauna.

Maresalul Antonescu,
7 Iunie 1942

{Figure 6}



{Figure 7}



{Figure 8}

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El poder necropolítico de los hombres en la literatura latinoamericana

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La masculinidad extrema se relaciona frecuentemente con el poder, especialmente el poder absoluto. Desafortunadamente el poder absoluto de un solo hombre típicamente viene a costa del bienestar de otros. Por supuesto, cuando uno tiene poder absoluto, los demás lo pierden. Como cualquier recurso natural, hay un límite de poder, y aunque puede ser compartido, generalmente hay una persona o un grupo pequeño que guarda todo. Esto es algo que ocurre frecuentemente en el mundo real, como en las numerosas dictaduras que han controlado varios países a través de la historia. En estas dictaduras y situaciones similares en que una persona o un pequeño grupo controlan todo, siempre hay muchas muertes, y para la gente que no muere, la vida apenas parece una vida real.

El poder absoluto roba el espíritu de los vivos para que ellos parezcan como muertos vivientes, fantasmas que solo pueden seguir a través de las acciones de la vida cotidiana. Por eso llegó el término “necropolítica”, que se refiere al “ejercicio de poder soberano de decisión sobre la muerte de los sujetos” (Ribas-Casasayas 60). La idea de la necropolítica aparece en dos textos. En la novela *Pedro Páramo* por Juan Rulfo, el personaje principal Pedro Páramo tiene poder absoluto sobre su pueblo mexicano de Comala, y en la novela *El lugar sin límites* por José Donoso, el personaje de don Alejo controla el destino del pueblo Estación El Olivo. En las dos novelas estos hombres tienen el poder necropolítico otorgado por la masculinidad extrema, y como resultado crean pueblos de muertos vivientes.

Con respecto a la masculinidad que da el poder a los dos hombres, la jerarquía de los géneros es muy importante en ambas novelas. En ambos casos las mujeres parecen existir sólo para servir a los hombres. En *El lugar sin límites*, el único lugar donde la gente realmente se reúne es el burdel. Casi toda la vida social en Estación El Olivo ocurre en el burdel; es el lugar donde todos celebran la victoria de don Alejo cuando gana el rol de diputado, y el lugar donde van Pancho Vega y Octavio para olvidar su vergüenza después de una charla infructuosa con don Alejo. Las mujeres del burdel existen en este

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contexto para aumentar el sentimiento de la masculinidad de los hombres. Mientras tanto, los hombres que van al burdel esperan que sus esposas se queden en la casa y que nunca se quejen de los eventos. Por eso los hombres en este pueblo se sienten muy poderosos por la masculinidad. Don Alejo, quien es dueño de casi todo en Estación El Olivo, según los habitantes del pueblo es “...como Dios. Hace lo que quiere. Todos le tienen miedo” (Donoso 39). Ya viviendo en un pueblo donde las mujeres se someten mientras los hombres controlan, para don Alejo es fácil tener todo el poder en el pueblo con propiedad de toda la tierra del pueblo, su rol de diputado en el pueblo, e incluso sus cuatro perros grandes e intimidantes. Todos estos factores juntos generan una imagen de don Alejo como el patriarca en el pueblo.

Hay un sentimiento semejante en el pueblo de Comala en *Pedro Páramo*, donde las mujeres solo existen como sirvientes de los deseos de los hombres. Lo vemos en la mujer de Donis, quien dice que desde que se casó con él, nunca sale de la casa: “Yo sé tan poco de la gente. Nunca salgo. Aquí donde me ve, aquí he estado sempiternamente... Bueno, ni tan siempre. Sólo desde que él me hizo su mujer” (Rulfo 49). Esta mujer ni siquiera tiene un nombre propio, simplemente se la conoce como esposa. En este caso parece que cuando las mujeres se casan, en una manera terminan de existir. La mujer de Donis no conoce a nadie del pueblo, e inferimos que ni la gente del pueblo la conoce. En cierta manera esta vida sin salir de la casa y sin conocer a nadie es como terminar de vivir. Además, como la mujer de Donis, Susana San Juan también está a la merced de unos hombres. La novela implica que su padre Bartolomé quizás tenía relaciones sexuales con ella cuando era más joven. Si es verdad, significaría que hasta su padre, que normalmente debe ser uno de los hombres más confiables en su vida, la trata como simplemente un objeto de placer. Además Pedro Páramo está enamorado de ella, e intenta controlarla y hasta “obtenerla”. Incluso habla de matar a Bartolomé para que no tenga que compartirla con él: “...ahora no tengo ganas de volverla a perder. ¿Tú me entiendes, Fulgor? Dile a su padre que vaya a seguir explotando sus minas. Y allá... me imagino que será fácil desaparecer al viejo en aquellas regiones adonde nadie va nunca” (Rulfo 82). En este caso Pedro Páramo también vuelve a ser patriarca a causa de la jerarquía de género en su pueblo y con su uso de masculinidad extrema a través del tratamiento a las mujeres como si fueran solo objetos.

Así llegamos a la idea de la necropolítica. En un análisis de *El lugar sin límites* García-Moreno dice que en las novelas de Donoso “power is very often understood in sexual terms and is ultimately measured by the capacity to appropriate, penetrate, or reduce the other to a lifeless thing” (26). El poder se manifiesta en *El lugar sin límites*, y también se hace en una manera muy parecida en *Pedro Páramo*. Esta descripción de

García-Moreno de la representación del poder es muy similar a la necropolítica, debido a la masculinidad extrema que demuestran los dos hombres. Con tanto poder en los pueblos en que viven, don Alejo y Pedro Páramo exhiben el uso de la necropolítica, porque las decisiones de los dos dictan el curso de las vidas de los demás. Especialmente Pedro Páramo juega con las vidas de los demás como si fueran juguetes, sin preocuparse por las consecuencias. Esto lo vemos en las varias maneras en que resuelve sus riñas con otros. Con Toribio Aldrete, cuando quiere tomar parte de su propiedad, Pedro Páramo exige que Fulgor le mienta a él para obtener más tierra:

—La semana venidera irás [Fulgor] con el Aldrete. Y le dices que recorra el lienzo. Ha invadido tierras de la Media Luna.

—Él hizo bien sus mediciones. A mí me consta.

—Pues dile que se equivocó. Que estuvo mal calculado. Derrumba las leyes si es preciso. (Rulfo 38)

Por supuesto Fulgor lo hace, y todo sucede sin consecuencias para Pedro Páramo, y hasta dice que “la ley de ahora en adelante la vamos a hacer nosotros” (Rulfo 38). Estos eventos demuestran su poder absoluto sobre el pueblo.

Pedro Páramo utiliza la necropolítica también para saldar su deuda con los Preciado, cuando en vez de pagarle, decide casarse con Dolores Preciado para que la familia se olvide de la deuda. El matrimonio generalmente es algo muy serio, y cuando Dolores se entera de la propuesta parece que ella esté muy emocionada: “Fue muy fácil encampanarse a la Dolores. Si hasta le relumbraron los ojos y se le descompuso la cara” (Rulfo 36). Sin embargo, para Pedro Páramo es como una transacción de negocio. Finalmente, por el matrimonio con Pedro Páramo Dolores queda embarazada, y cuando se da cuenta de lo terrible que es Pedro, ella huye de Comala y no regresa nunca en su vida. Este acto es claramente un acto necropolítico porque cambia completamente el curso de la vida de Dolores.

Finalmente, un ejemplo muy importante de la necropolítica en *Pedro Páramo* es al final de la novela, después de la muerte de Susana San Juan. Para marcar su muerte unas campanas suenan por varios días, pero como no saben por qué suenan, la gente celebra por todo el tiempo que sigue. Aunque es simplemente un caso de un malentendido, Pedro Páramo se enoja tanto con ellos que decide dejarlos morir: “Me cruzaré de brazos y Comala se morirá de hambre” (Rulfo 114). Mucha gente del pueblo es pobre y cuenta con la Media Luna para seguir siendo próspera y para mantener viva Comala. Por eso, esta decisión de Pedro Páramo es como una pena de muerte para la gente pobre y para el pueblo en general. Con tanto poder como tiene, él puede decidir una sola cosa y causar la muerte de un pueblo entero, simplemente por una equivocación.

Don Alejo también influye en las vidas de la gente simplemente para satisfacer sus deseos. El poder necropolítico puede provenir de influencias sociales o políticas, de las cuales don Alejo tiene ambas. Como dije antes, su posición social es como una figura patriarcal, y hasta algunos del pueblo lo ven como una figura divina, semejante a Dios. Y en cierta manera como Dios, don Alejo tiene el poder de crear vida nueva y causar la muerte. Uno puede decir que don Alejo creó la vida de la Japonesita, porque fue su apuesta con la Japonesa Grande que la llevó vida. Por supuesto don Alejo hizo la apuesta solamente por entretenimiento, por su curiosidad de la Manuela como travesti, y es la mala intención tras sus acciones lo que convierte su poder de ser divino, semejante a Dios, en ser realmente parte de la necropolítica. Al fin y al cabo, el poder necropolítico se usa para beneficios propios, sin tener en cuenta las consecuencias que recaen en los demás.

Además, el poder social que tiene don Alejo también se convierte en la necropolítica cuando decide no usar ese poder para ayudar a los demás, aún cuando hacerlo no tendría ningún costo personal. Su desinterés por ayudar a los demás continúa incluso al final de la novela cuando Octavio y Pancho Vega brutalmente golpean a la Manuela, hasta que ella "...apenas ve, apenas oye, apenas siente, ve, no, no ve, y ellos se escabullen a través de la mora y queda ella sola junto al río que la separa de las viñas donde don Alejo espera benevolente" (Donoso 69). En cierta manera la muerte de la Manuela es culpa de don Alejo, porque ya tiene tanto poder en el pueblo e incluso poder sobre Pancho Vega y Octavio, pero nunca lo usa. La necropolítica es muy evidente en esta escena porque aunque son Pancho Vega y Octavio los que matan a la Manuela, realmente con su influencia social sobre todos, don Alejo tiene el control sobre si la Manuela vive o muere.

Junto con el poder social, don Alejo también exhibe la necropolítica a través de su poder político. Como diputado en las escenas del pasado, y como senador en el presente de la novela, don Alejo controla lo que ocurre en el pueblo, y lo más importante de su trabajo como funcionario en la novela es su promesa de traer electricidad al pueblo. Con un puesto en la política, es la única persona en el pueblo que puede lograr la instalación de la electricidad, pero, como siempre, tiene su propio interés en el corazón de sus decisiones. La promesa de traer la electricidad solo la haría realidad por la posibilidad de que con la electricidad también llegaría una carretera en el pueblo que aumentaría el valor de la tierra que posee. Pero cuando se entera de que no habrá una carretera en Estación El Olivo, don Alejo deja su promesa y pasa a una idea diferente que será más beneficiosa para él mismo. Y con esto llegamos a las secuelas del poder necropolítico, que realmente causa la destrucción de los pueblos y la gente que los habitan.

Al comienzo de *El lugar sin límites*, don Alejo ya ha creado un pueblo de muertos vivientes en un sentido metafórico a través de la desesperación. El pueblo de Estación El Olivo se está desmoronando, y cuando don Alejo informa a la gente que no tuvo éxito llevando la electricidad, parece que ha perdido la última esperanza para salvarlo. Particularmente la Japonesita, mientras sigue viva físicamente, se acerca a la muerte espiritual porque pierde la esperanza después de recibir esta noticia: “la electricidad y el Wurlitzer no fueron más que espejismos que durante un instante, por suerte muy corto, la indujeron a creer que era posible otra cosa. Ahora no. No quedaba ni una esperanza que pudiera dolerle, eliminando también el miedo” (Donoso 31). También con la falta de sentimientos positivos, pierde sentimientos negativos como el dolor y el miedo. Aunque puede parecer beneficioso dejar atrás lo negativo, estos sentimientos son tan importantes como los positivos para experimentar la vida completa. Mientras que Rulfo representa la idea de muertos vivientes literalmente con un pueblo lleno de fantasmas, cómo dice González-Allende en su análisis de las dos novelas: “frente a los muertos de ultratumba en Comala, [Donoso] creó unos muertos en vida, y frente al infierno real se decidió por la vida cotidiana como metáfora del infierno” (18). El poder necropolítico que utiliza don Alejo le roba a la Japonesita y a la gente del pueblo la última esperanza de reconstruir su hogar, y en cierta manera les empuja a una muerte en vida.

Como si eso no fuera suficiente, don Alejo va un paso más allá al crear un pueblo de muertos vivientes en un sentido físico también. Como dije antes, cuando don Alejo se entera de que nunca llegará una carretera en Estación El Olivo, decide concentrarse en otra idea más beneficiosa para él mismo. Sobre todo, su interés principal es mejorar sus ganancias, y hará cualquier cosa para que esto suceda, sin importar como sus acciones afectarán a los otros. Como se da cuenta la Manuela:

...don Alejo, tal como había creado este pueblo, tenía ahora otros designios y para llevarlos a cabo necesitaba eliminar la Estación El Olivo. Echaría abajo todas las casas, borraría las calles ásperas de barro y boñigas, volvería a unir los adobes de los paredones a la tierra de donde surgieron y araría esa tierra, todo para algún propósito incomprensible. (Donoso 32)

Cuando deja de ser lucrativo mantener el pueblo, don Alejo decide comprar la tierra de todos en el pueblo y convertir todo en viñas. Como siempre, sigue el camino más rentable para él sin pensar en los demás. Este acto presenta la necropolítica más física, porque eliminar la Estación El Olivo obligaría a los demás a elegir entre irse o morir.

Por otro lado la idea de un pueblo de muertos vivientes es muy literal en *Pedro Páramo*. Mucha gente muere a manos de Pedro Páramo, por su duro reinado en Comala y

por su decisión de detener cualquiera forma de ayuda al pueblo lleno de gente pobre. La línea entre la vida y la muerte en Comala es muy borrosa, y los que murieron allí reaparecen como fantasmas. Como dice Damiana Cisneros:

Este pueblo está lleno de ecos. Tal parece que estuvieran cerrados en el hueco de las paredes o debajo de las piedras. Cuando caminas, sientes que te van pisando los pasos. Oyes crujidos. Risas. Unas risas ya muy viejas, como cansadas de reír. Y voces ya desgastadas por el uso.... Hubo un tiempo que estuve oyendo durante muchas noches el rumor de una fiesta. (Rulfo 39)

En este pueblo los muertos siguen viviendo una vida de ecos. Unos, como Damiana y Eduviges Dyada, caminan por las calles e interactúan con el mundo vivo, mientras otros, como Dorotea, se quedan enterrados en la tierra y solo hablan con los otros enterrados. Incluso la gente viva en Comala parece muerta en vida, de una manera metafórica como los de *El lugar sin límites*. Como el ejemplo antes de la mujer de Donis, la gente viva que se queda en Comala apenas vive. Van por los pasos de la vida diaria sin sentimientos verdaderos. Es claro en ambas novelas que, a través de los actos necropolíticos, Pedro Páramo y don Alejo causaron mucho daño a los demás, robaron la esperanza de todos, y al fin y al cabo crearon dos pueblos de muertos en vida.

Unos han utilizado el poder necropolítico para controlar países enteros, pero también puede aparecer en menor escala. El daño que causa la necropolítica es muy claro en dictaduras y otras situaciones grandes, pero es difícil imaginar que las consecuencias podrían ser tan graves en un pequeño pueblo. Estas dos novelas demuestran claramente el daño que uno podría hacer con el poder necropolítico incluso en un pueblito. Aunque estos hombres no tienen tanto poder como un dictador de un país, todavía influyen las vidas y las muertes de la gente que los rodean, y hasta empujan los pueblos a la ruina. Podemos ver en ambas novelas el peligro que presenta un solo hombre en una sociedad patriarcal cuando todo se mezcla con el poder absoluto.

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Alone on Christmas? No Can Do: The Troublesome Portrayals of (Single) Women in Christmas Romantic Comedy Films

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This thesis investigates American-produced Christmas romantic comedy films and the ways in which this genre presents gendered expectations. By analyzing fifteen films—a varied selection of the most popular made-for-television, theatrical and streaming Christmas movies produced after 2000—I explore the roles that the films’ characters play within their social environments and what the overall message is about American cultural values in relation to the holiday season. Overall, women in these films are presented as out of place in the office and rather belonging in small-town American homes where they are able to prioritize love and family. This excludes (happily) single people and women who manage to work and raise a family simultaneously. Through these presentations of women, I find that Christmas romantic comedies stress a need for romantic relationships around the holidays, especially among women, and portray women and men in normative gender roles.

I. Introduction

For many people, the December holiday season means cuddling up on the couch with a blanket, some hot cocoa, and watching one of the many heartwarming Christmas romantic comedies. But for individuals who are involuntarily single these films may leave them feeling dejected by the end of the movie because they are without a romantic partner on Christmas unlike the women in these movies who eventually find love for the holidays. With all of these films centered around romance, it is hard to ignore the constant reminders to couple during the holiday season and, as a result, many who are single tend to experience sadness (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). For many Americans, this holiday is considered part of cuffing season; a cultural concept that associates this time of the year with being in a romantic relationship by “cuffing” someone or, in other words, finding someone to commit to spending these holidays with, and maybe even longer. With countless holiday films debuting each year in theaters, on television networks like

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Hallmark and Lifetime, and now on streaming sites like Netflix, Christmas romantic comedies have populated the holiday season with stories of (mostly) cis-gendered heterosexual women escaping from their lonely lives in corporate America to find love under the Christmas tree (Brayton, 2021; Rosewarne, 2018).

The holiday season in the US consists of several consumerist activities and one of them is watching Christmas movies. The Christmas movie category is filled with romantic comedy storylines that often feature a young woman finding love during the holiday season, usually with a man. For many Americans, watching these movies are a crucial element of the Christmas season. The central question this thesis addresses is, what do romantic Christmas movies communicate to audiences about gender norms and romantic relationships? Movies often reflect and reinforce societal norms. Therefore, the common romantic storylines that appear in Christmas movies produced in the US for American consumers reflect the values that mainstream American society has attached to this holiday, or at least what individuals aspire to around Christmas time (Rosewarne, 2018). Considering that Christmas is a peak moment of cuffing season, these movies intensify the societal pressure to be in a relationship around the holidays. Furthermore, while these films depict women as happiest when coupled during the holidays, they also manage to endorse gender normative roles of American society and suggest that women are to follow them in order to have a happy holiday season. Thus, this thesis also considers the question, what gender roles and expectations do mainstream American holiday movies perpetuate?

II. Literature Review

Romance is a popular genre commonly found in American movies and television shows. Romance even emerges in movies that are not labeled or advertised as romantic films, partly because many viewers like to root for a love interest. However, the romantic relationships depicted in most of these films, regardless if they are explicitly labeled or advertised as a romance film or not “may engender unrealistic expectations (of sex, love, and romance) in those who are exposed to them” (Galloway, et al., 2015, p. 688). The overwhelming majority of American Christmas movies feature heterosexual romance as a main theme, suggesting that romance is an essential aspect of the Christmas season. In fact, it is hard to find a Christmas movie today without a love story, especially when it comes to films that target adult audiences. Sharp and Ganong (2011) found that (single) female viewers of these movies reported that the “holidays reminded them of their single status, encouraging thoughts about their romantic lives, and increasing the likelihood of experiencing sadness” (p. 971). Since American societal norms expect

individuals to be coupled during the holidays, single women, who are often the main characters in these movies, cannot escape the constant reminders that they also ought to be in a committed romantic relationship during this time of the year.

Indeed, these films encourage coupling, marriage, and family, and thus convey that being single is undesirable. In this sense, these movies are merely a reflection of the values and beliefs of an American society that has marriage and family at its core. The majority of romantic plotlines that exist between a woman and a man in American cinema, highlights the importance of the institution of marriage and prevalence of heteronormativity in American society. This begins early, as Cherlin (2009) observed “the main message we are giving to young adults and single parents is ‘Get married’” (p. 11). For example, non-married female characters in the films are often “hyper focused on finding a man,” and the movies usually end “with lead female characters marrying” (Sharp & Ganong, 2011, p. 975). There is an assumption that in order for women to be happy and feel complete, they must be coupled (Taylor, 2011) and/or on the path to having a family.

Even though being single is sometimes a choice when it comes to one’s relationship status, remaining single is viewed by many in society as a “problem for women,” (Budgeon, 2016, p. 402) or as “a failure to perform heterosexuality adequately” (Taylor, 2011, p. 22). Romantic comedy films push the idea that being single is less of a choice and more of an unfortunate situation for women that requires a remedy. Therefore, these movies actively contribute to singlism in American culture. “Singlism” is the discrimination against single individuals that is “manifested in everyday thoughts, interactions, laws, and social policies-” (Sharp & Ganong, 2011, p. 957) and the assumption that everyone wants to get/be married and have kids (Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Carr & Byrne, 2005). This is a pressure that women face more often than men, especially in the media because single men are more likely to be portrayed as bachelors (Gerson, 2010). Additionally, singleness is depicted as a temporary state within young women’s lives and is not considered an adequate long-term lifestyle. Only those who attempt to “escape” or end their single status are visible and accepted in society (Taylor, 2011). The responsibility for escaping singlehood rests with women, instead of accepting that remaining single is a viable lifestyle.

In addition to reproducing the social pressure for women to marry, these films also suggest that motherhood is the next probable step towards being complete as an American woman. Family life is often portrayed in films as incredibly gratifying, more than paid work, and the natural role for female characters. These films glamorize motherhood and family life by portraying it as utopian (Hundley, 2000). The main

characters tend to have positive relationships with most of their relatives and have very well-behaved children, which in reality is not always the case. This implies that family life is worth giving up a career or a life of independence.

Moreover, these movies, specifically the ones made for television, often suggest that women have to make a compromise between love and work and that they should not attempt to have it all (Hundley, 2000; Brayton, 2021). Women will turn down promotions to keep family at the forefront, and then these characters are rewarded with happiness and love in return (Hundley, 2000). When female characters choose this path, they reinforce normative gender roles and the importance of small-town America as opposed to corporate America. Additionally, Hallmark movies present conservative values that perceive women as being happier in rural family-oriented spaces as opposed to work spaces (Brayton, 2021). They show this by “featuring an unassuming but unhappy woman who retreats from a hectic corporate career and bustling city life to find romance, family and new career opportunities in a bucolic fictional town” (Brayton, 2021, p. 51). These storylines suggest that women are out of place in these types of corporate spaces and can only find love once they give up their jobs and the big city life to settle down in an ideal American small-town (Rosewarne, 2018). Brayton (2021) claims that “women’s unhappiness (in these movies) can be directly attributed to the working conditions of late capitalism and cut throat corporate culture, which leaves them ‘empty’ and devoid of love and romance” (p. 61). Yet again, these films imply that women cannot handle the working lifestyle and belong in more nurturing environments, like the home.

In addition to women choosing love and family over their career, other common themes like rejecting capitalist greed, and spreading fortune to those who are less fortunate, all to credit the “spirit of Christmas,” are prevalent. Brayton (2021) suggests that “no other film genre than Christmas movies offers a more sustained and recognizable roasting of capitalism with its attention to socioeconomic inequality, workaholism and corporate greed” (p. 53). For a holiday that has consumerism at the heart of it, these movies resist this ideal by presenting a magical “spirit of Christmas” value that encourages generosity, which often leads to character transformation. However, these mainstream movies rarely feature the original religious meaning of the holiday, except for occasional re-enactments of the nativity scene. Overall, these movies repeat plotlines that are familiar to most American viewers, are entertaining, and are generally easy to understand (Zacharek, 2020) and, therefore, easy to consume. Although, at the same time they reinforce gendered societal pressures through repetitive storylines of women who wish for love during the holidays.

III. Data and Methods

I analyzed fifteen American films focusing on Christmas and produced after the year 2000. These films represent a convenience sample, since I selected them either because I had previously watched them, I had seen them advertised as popular, or because they were easily accessible via YouTube and other streaming services like Amazon, Netflix and Hulu. This selection includes some of the most popular romantic comedy Christmas films, as well as some of the most popular streaming and made-for-television Christmas movies.² I paid particular attention to social norms and overarching themes. While watching all of these films I took detailed notes on any dialogue or plot points that seemed to be reflecting values of American society, and how lead characters interacted with their social environments. Then I drew connections between common behaviors or themes in order to understand what these films are collectively communicating to audiences.

Most of the main characters in these films were either women or a heterosexual duo, with the exception of two films that featured homosexual characters. All of these characters were portrayed to be in their twenties and thirties with the exception of a few characters in *Love Actually*. Except for two films, all of the main characters and most of the side characters were heterosexual individuals. Although the films featuring non-heterosexual characters followed similar conventions as the other Christmas romance films, they also addressed (at least briefly) the effect that their sexual orientation had on their lives and how this aspect of their identity limited them in certain ways. The majority of the main characters in these films were white. One film featured mostly African American characters and a few others featured a mixture of some white and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) characters. The main characters are also commonly middle/upper-class with jobs that are usually mentioned very little. Moreover, lower-class characters appeared more often in the films that featured BIPOC characters.

For the most part, these films focused on thin and conventionally beautiful people. Only one film features an overweight lead, who is played by Queen Latifah in *Last Holiday*. However, in this film her character is portrayed as lonely and essentially invisible to society at the beginning. Furthermore, other films that feature overweight side characters appear as a laughingstock. *Love Actually* features a few female characters who are depicted as overweight in the film and are targeted and portrayed as not desired by men as a result. In these films “femininity is partially defined as thin, flawless, attractive women who ought not concern themselves with their appearance” (Hundley, 2000, p. 22).

² See appendix for full list of films.

These movies present beauty through a very narrow lens. It is safe to say that this film genre is not representative of the American population, however it is evolving slowly but surely to include BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ characters among others.

IV. Findings

One of the main themes found in many of the films is the expectation that women should bring home a male date for Christmas. The film *Holidate* exemplifies this, when two young and single strangers, Sloane and Jackson, make a deal to be each other's dates for all holidays so they never have to be alone. Sloane is intensely singled out by her family at Christmas because she is the only one of her siblings who is not married or in a committed relationship. When Sloane is complaining about Christmas with her family, she tells Jackson "Every time I walk into a room, I'm showered in a sea of pity and sad glances" because she is single. So, in order to avoid incessant reminders from her family about the need to find a man, Sloane feels as if she has no other choice but to bring a fake boyfriend to her family holiday gatherings. The criticism that Sloane experiences for being single is a reflection of American society's stigmatization of people who choose to remain single (Carr & Byrne, 2005). Often "women's social identities reflected being invisible in their families, less valued than their married siblings, and knowing that their parents preferred them to be married" (Sharp & Ganong, 2011, p. 960). Sloane very much experiences this pressure, mostly from her mother, and feels at fault for her single status. Her mother tells her that she's "much prettier with makeup" on, when she is already wearing makeup, and suggests that she "could at least put on a nice top." This criticism from her mother further perpetuates stereotypes of femininity, specifically beauty standards.

Similar circumstances occur in *The Christmas Contract*. In order to make her ex-boyfriend, Foster, jealous and to present to her family during the holiday season that she has successfully moved on from their breakup, Jolie strikes a deal with her friend's older brother, Jack, to be her fake date on Christmas. Sometimes it is easier to find a fake date than to face questioning family members over the holidays and to avoid sitting at the kids table, which actually happens to Sloane in *Holidate*. Carr & Byrne (2005) argue that "single persons are the target of stigmatization," and single people are highly conscious that they are targets, making the stigma more existent (p. 84). Sloane and Jolie, like many single heterosexual women, have internalized this stigma and believe that the holidays are easier when spent with a date even if they have no romantic feeling towards that person.

The expectation placed on women to bring dates to holiday gatherings is merely one aspect of a society that pressures individuals to couple with the goal of eventually marrying. “The United States is unquestionably a promarriage society,” (Carr & Byrne, 2005, p. 84) and that is reflected in the subtle, and not so subtle messages that these movies send. As mentioned above with *Holidate*, Sloane’s mother constantly reminds her that she should be, like her siblings, on a path towards marriage. The alternative is to end up like her aunt who always brings random strangers to holiday gatherings and is portrayed as a middle-aged hyper-sexual outcast. In the US, pressure to marry along with the single stigma are the strongest for those in their late 20s and into their early 30s (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). It is acceptable to be single when women are younger, but eventually a woman’s “biological clock starts ticking” and pressure for marriage emerges. After that period of time society gives up on pressuring those who are no longer in their biological prime for childbearing. This social value is evident through the pressure that Sloane faces to couple and the lack of pressure that her aunt experiences who is viewed as a lost cause for love because of her age. In a way, the main characters in *Holidate* initially make fun of these ridiculous film conventions, but in the end, succumb to them as they end up falling into the same traps when the movie closes with the main characters in love.

Similar to Sloane’s experience in *Holidate*, the young women in *Happiest Season*, also face pressure from their parents to couple, specifically into heterosexual relationships, and to eventually have children. Harper and her two sisters, Sloane and Jane, consistently compete for their parents’ affection. In order to win acceptance from their parents, they need to be coupled and on the track towards a traditional nuclear family. When Harper brings Abby to her parents’ house for Christmas, pretending that she is her orphan friend instead of her girlfriend, Harper’s parents and friends continuously invite Harper’s high school boyfriend to gatherings to try and push them back together. Additionally, their father makes it a point to parade his grandchildren (Sloane’s children) at a dinner event to his political donors. When Sloane asks if she can help promote her father’s campaign for mayor he tells her “you just bring that beautiful family and show them off” followed by “these might be the only grandchildren we ever have.” However, considering that Sloane was an attorney before she became a full-time mom, she can clearly offer more than motherhood to her father’s campaign. Moreover, Sloane and her husband are separated but she is afraid to tell her parents because they will be disappointed since she is only valued in her family as the mother of their grandchildren. When Sloane finally shares with her parents that her marriage has ended, she tells them “without my family I am worthless to you;” in reference to her father’s

earlier remarks. Furthermore, the youngest daughter, Jane, who is single and has never been in a serious relationship, is continuously overlooked and underappreciated by her parents because they “gave up on her,” as the mother claims, while her two older sisters get all of the positive attention. Hence more reasons why Harper feels pressured by society and her family to fulfill the normative expectation to become a heterosexual wife and mother which forces her to hide her sexual orientation. Therefore, it is not just about Harper being gay but also about how children, specifically women, feel like they have to live up to their parents’ expectation of being married to a man and eventually becoming a mother.

Brad and Kate, the two main characters, in *Four Christmases* experience a similar pressure to marry, leading them to rethink their future as a couple who initially decided against matrimony. They avoid their families around the holidays because their parents and siblings remind them that their cohabitation lifestyle is unacceptable compared to conventional marriages. When asked why they are not getting married, Brad responds “we’re happy. Marriage just brings pressure and stress.” This film is realistic in terms of its depiction of families where marriages end in divorce and are not always “picture perfect.” Kate and Brad see marriage as the beginning to the end and do not want to find themselves divorced, like their parents. Furthermore, they are portrayed as not being ready to take care of children. For example, when holding a baby, Kate accidentally hits the baby’s head on a kitchen cabinet, then later in the film Kate cannot swaddle baby Jesus, and Brad cannot stand the sight of puke, which is something that babies do often. This is another film that highlights America’s pressure for marriage and family, by depicting a couple who lives outside the norm, at least initially. However, as the movie progresses it appears that Kate and Brad follow the path that their family has suggested them along. The film ends with Kate in a hospital bed holding a newborn baby in her arms and Brad looking on. Thus, like in *Holidate*, they surrender and give in to the American expectation of marriage and children. Additionally, these characters address the fact that divorce impacts many people including children of divorced couples, but the main characters still somehow have hope that they can make it work. Marriage often ends in divorce in the US, so movies like this one could be attempting to “endorse” relationship ideals (Wilson & Hefner, 2013). Therefore, *Four Christmases* attempts to look past the United States’ discouraging rates of divorce in order to preserve the value of marriage and family in American society.

These films also portray what Sharp and Ganong (2011) refer to as society’s promotion of “marriage and motherhood as central to women’s identities.” (p. 958). Similar to how Kate in *Four Christmases* is initially depicted as unsuited for motherhood,

Jessie, the main character in *A Bride for Christmas*, struggles to be a successful bride. Jessie has run away from the altar on her wedding day on three separate occasions. Even though Jessie does not feel ready to get married, her mother pressures her down the aisle time and time again, even after she expresses uncertainty. Therefore, Jessie has made marriage a priority, so once she realizes that she is in love with Aiden, she immediately asks him to marry her. *A Bride for Christmas* is a perfect example of how Americans, specifically heterosexual women, are in a hurry to get married (Cherlin, 2009).

It is not just young single women in these films, who are pressured to be in a committed relationship, and ideally in a marriage; so are single parents with young children. But in contrast to films about single individuals where women's mothers play a central role in pushing for coupledness, in movies such as *Christmas on the Bayou* and *The Perfect Holiday*, the women's young children take center stage, as the men need to win them over in order to earn the love of the women. Rosewarne (2018) suggests that single parents are often featured in romantic narratives because being "partnerless" is viewed as "a temporary state before characters transition into romance and ultimately a nuclear family and existing children speeds up the construction of the nuclear unit" (p. 23). For example, in *Christmas on the Bayou*, Caleb seems to spend more time with Katherine's son than with her, and wins over the son before she even takes an interest in him. In the end, the main reason why she wants to be with Caleb is because he would be a good father for her son. This dynamic illustrates the fact that these men have to act as replacements for the deadbeat, almost villainous fathers who are barely involved in their children's lives. And while female characters are usually single because they divorced a bad man, male characters are typically widowed, making their separated status not a choice, and more endearing (Rosewarne, 2018). Considering that in the US, fathers are more likely than mothers to be absent in their children's lives, these portrayals reinstate the social perception that, unlike men, women are expected to be naturally "good mothers."

This scenario also plays out in *The Perfect Holiday*. Even though Nancy is at the time going through a divorce, she is eager to find a new husband and potential father to her three children, who are still struggling with the fact that their parents are splitting up. Both in the movies and in real life, over time, American women feel pressure for marriage and family from their social environments as their friends couple/marry and less desirable men are available (Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Fallon & Stockstill, 2018; Cherlin, 2009). Nancy is very eager to maintain the traditional family structure when she brings Benjamin home to meet the kids on only their second date, which reflects the trend in US

society, that people tend to rush into new relationships very quickly as Americans have “sped up the hands on the relationship clock” (Cherlin, 2009, p. 201).

Conversely, when a single father is the romantic interest, he is perceived differently than the deadbeat fathers in movies with a single mother as the main character. Additionally, their children’s birth mothers are rarely ever mentioned and it is not always clear why she is absent from their lives (e.g. divorce, death). The potential lovers in *The Princess Switch* and *The Holiday* are both single dads who appear to be very good fathers to their daughters. In *The Holiday*, when Amanda meets Graham’s daughters for the first time, the girls express a desire to have a woman around more often. One girl says “we never have grown-ups here, at all girls” and the other girl responds “I really like it.” At this moment, Graham begins to feel pressured to bring a new mother home for his daughters, which not only exemplifies the central role children in these films play in recoupling their parents, but also that women are always viewed as potential mothers. In *The Princess Switch*, Margaret falls in love with Kevin, a single father who has a very strong and friendly relationship with his daughter who spends plenty of time with them throughout the course of the film. Margaret eventually develops a strong relationship with Kevin’s daughter and after catching the bouquet at another wedding, Kevin tells Margaret that she “might want to hang on to that bouquet,” suggesting that marriage is in their future. Additionally, it is important to note that the gender of the child is an essential plot point, considering these movies posit that daughters need a female figure (a stepmom) and sons need a male figure (a stepdad) actively in their lives.

Another common occurrence in these holiday romantic comedies is that women will relocate to be with men, either to rural towns and/or royal palaces. In this situation, the lead female character faces a geographical conflict but usually ends up choosing love in a small-town over their career opportunities in the big city. For example, in *Christmas on the Bayou* Katherine turns down a promotion that she has been working towards for a long time to move back to her hometown and be with her childhood crush. Once again, children are crucial as the push mainly comes from her son, who really just wants his mother to spend more time with him instead of at the office. Hence why she chooses to move back to the rural town where she grew up because there is a potential new father for her son and fewer corporate distractions, allowing her to spend more time with her son and birth family. In *Christmas on Wheels* Ashley faces a similar conflict when she goes home to her rural hometown in Washington for Christmas and meets Duncan, an attorney whom she eventually grows fond of. At the moment when she finally gets the opportunity to open her dream antique shop in Seattle, she turns it down to stay in her hometown, for love and small-town traditions. The conflict in these types of films is “being fabulous,

strong and professionally independent counterposed with the desire to secure a heterosexual partner” (Taylor, 2011, p. 14). It also seems to suggest that women cannot have it all.

This past holiday season (2020) two mainstream US holiday films were released that feature LGBTQ+ lead characters who are “rarely depicted on-screen” (Rao, 2020) or in this genre that is historically rooted in heteronormative standards. One being the *Christmas Set-Up* which is the first romantic Christmas film featuring gay lead characters to premiere on the Lifetime network. And the second, *Happiest Season* is one of the first major Hollywood-produced Christmas films to feature lesbian lead characters. However, these two films seemed to consist of very similar conventions as previous Christmas romantic comedies. *Happiest Season* goes above and beyond the conventions of the Christmas movie genre by addressing the struggle for family acceptance among LGBTQ+ individuals in conservative families. On the other hand, *The Christmas Setup* barely addresses the issues that LGBTQ+ individuals face in a heteronormative society, and overall focuses on choosing love over big-city life and highly revered career opportunities. The main character, Hugo, goes home to Milwaukee to spend Christmas with his lonely widowed mother and runs into Patrick, his high school crush. When Hugo gets his dream job offer in London, England, he has to make a choice between Patrick and London. Needless to say, he chooses love over his career opportunity. Even though this is a film about two men and thus breaks a major convention of the Christmas romance genre, the main character is presented as very feminine in comparison to his masculine love interest and the film follows a very similar plotline as other movies within this genre, as Hugo chooses love in the suburbs of Milwaukee over a career in London.

Women in holiday films not only move to small-town America for their love interests and in pursuit of “traditional roles and values” instead of corporate roles, sometimes they fall in love with a prince. And while in these cases they move up the socioeconomic ladder, they also, like the women who move to small towns, have to leave behind their career, friends, and family. For example, in *The Princess Switch*, Stacey, a middle-class baker, switches lives with her doppelgänger, Lady Margaret, a soon-to-be-married princess. When they both fall in love while living the other person’s life, they decide to switch locations for good, allowing Stacey to marry the prince. So, Stacey leaves her life in Chicago behind for an upgrade to royal life on Christmas. Similarly, in *A Princess for Christmas*, when the prince is pressured to find a royal bride, Jules, a poor woman from Buffalo who is an in-law of the royal family, is invited to stay at the castle for Christmas with her niece and nephew who she is the legal guardian of. Jules and the prince end up falling in love, and when they are ridiculed by his fellow royal folk, they

defy the odds and show people the importance of true love. These types of situations are interesting since Americans have class-based expectations about marriage and tend to marry within their socioeconomic class (Fallon & Stockstill, 2018). This social value is apparent through the upper-class people who criticize the prince for wanting to be in a relationship with a woman from a lower-class background. Therefore, both of these films, among others, set unrealistic expectations for women by communicating that “regular girls” can marry into royalty. This is not a convention limited to the Christmas genre but also applies to many Disney fairytale films. In fact, these royal Christmas movies can be viewed as an extension of the Disney princess fairytale stories that have accompanied many young girls throughout their lives. In most of these cases the woman gives up her world to be in his. Their relationship also defies class lines considering many of these fairytales, such as *Cinderella*, allow a “regular girl” to become a princess by marrying into royalty, suggesting that marriage is an easy way for women to climb the social ranks.

In addition to the portrayal of princes liking “regular girls” is the idea that men like women who are different than them when it comes to socioeconomic status and in other ways. The royal men in *The Princess Switch*, *A Princess for Christmas* and *A Christmas Prince* find these regular girls refreshing, because they are so different from the other women these men are used to. In *A Christmas Prince*, Prince Richard falls in love with Amber, a journalist from New York City, who is pretending to be his little sister’s tutor in order to get closer to him for her work assignment. Even though they do not get along in the beginning, he finds it endearing when she wears Converse sneakers to a royal dinner event, and later in the movie he tells her “you’re more genuine than anyone I’ve ever met.” The prince takes an interest in her because he perceives her to be more authentic and true to herself than the royal women within his social circle who are often portrayed in these films as uptight and more concerned with reputation and appearances than anything else. Moreover, often in these movies the characters do not initially like each other, either as a result of a previous meeting or simply because they are so different from one another. But miraculously in the end, love conquers all existing tensions and class differences between the two. A similar cross-class love story takes place in *The Princess Switch*. Once the two women switch lives they almost immediately meet perfect men because opposites attract, and more specifically the prince likes that Stacy is “different.” However, it is important to note that since the two women look identical to one another, the same beauty standards apply in this case. Therefore, these women have to be refreshingly different from what he is used to from his social environment.

Considering these men are more established in their royal class status (perceived as success), the women will always leave their lives behind to be with the man.

Similar to how these films present women in traditional American gender roles, as belonging in the home and away from the big city, they also suggest how women are “supposed” to act in heterosexual relationships. These movies specifically portray heterosexual women as fitting into a passive role in relation to their male counterparts. In other words, women are often waiting for their man to come around and “sweep them off their feet” to start the relationship. This passive behavior is manifested in three different ways in these movies: love being unexpected, the spontaneity of soulmates and men organizing elaborate displays of affection that almost always take the woman by surprise.

First, love almost always appears when these women least expect it, which is ironic given that these women are sometimes actively looking for relationships at the beginning of the film. In *The Christmas Contract*, what seems like just a transactional trade-off for the lead woman to have a fake date on Christmas to make her ex-boyfriend jealous, turns into a beautiful love story when they fall in love with each other. Likewise, in *Last Holiday* once Georgia begins to focus on doing what makes her happy instead of waiting for a man to save her from her miserable life, her love interest finally pursues her. These films communicate to audiences that their special guy will appear when he is ready, not necessarily when she is in pursuit of the relationship. The concept of unexpected love is also the premise for one of the highest grossing and most popular American romantic comedy Christmas films, *The Holiday*.³ Iris and Amanda, the two lead women in *The Holiday*, attempt to escape from their lives to get far away from the men who wronged them. When Amanda first meets Graham, she tells him “you are unexpected,” meanwhile Iris says “anything could happen” immediately after she meets Miles, the man who will later become her love interest. *The Holiday* highlights the pressure that single people feel to be coupled especially during this time of the year even after they just ended relationships, reflecting once again that Americans rush from one relationship/marriage into another (Cherlin, 2009). On the other hand, the movie presents the overused convention of meeting an unexpected handsome stranger right in time for Christmas. Similar to *Four Christmases* and *Holidate*, *The Holiday* also strives to poke fun at the corniness of the romantic Christmas genre through mimicking the conventions that appear in these types of movies. One of the ways that this appears is through the

³ Overall *The Holiday*, grossed between \$205-206 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo, n.d.), which ranks the film as one of the highest grossing American Christmas films within the romantic comedy genre.

movie trailer voiceover that pops up throughout the film to remind Amanda that she is a cliché of the single woman escaping from her life to unexpectedly fall in love on Christmas in a magical English countryside. Through this element of the story, the filmmaker seems to be exploiting the corniness of the Christmas movie genre, but ultimately the movie ends in the same way as most other stories among the genre, with the two couples dancing together over champagne on New Year's Eve.

Second, the idea that there is “the one” person for everyone (soulmates), and along with that, the belief that everything is meant to be (destiny), arises in these films. In *A Bride for Christmas* Jessie is hyper-focused on finding “the one.” After kissing Aiden, whom she has not had any previous interest in, for the first time, she feels the “fireworks” and immediately decides to propose to him because she believes that they are soulmates (which also speaks to the love being unexpected convention). This sounds quite impulsive, but it reinforces the idea of “the one” which is a common portrayal of love in the media. The idea of destiny appears in *The Princess Switch* when the two women first meet. Lady Margaret claims that her and Stacy were “destined to run into each other” so they could switch lives and find love, and later in the film when the prince is convincing Stacy to marry him he says “You are my destiny. This was the plan. We were meant to be together.” The problem with this romantic ideal of soulmates or destiny, similar to the belief that love is unexpected, is that women are expected to passively wait for “the one” to come into their lives and sweep them off of their feet. Then once he shows up, these women are sometimes expected to give up their lives to be with him. This reinforces traditional American gender norms of courtship which assign heterosexual men the role of initiator while heterosexual women are only allowed to react once the man actively pursues her (Lamont, 2014).

Third, the man's organization of a grand public display of affection, such as staging an elaborate gesture, speech or proposal to win over the woman is another example of normative gender roles in heterosexual relationships which is essential to this movie genre. This concept sets a very high standard for heterosexual women to expect of heterosexual men in American society and often allows for second chances. In *Love Actually*, Jamie goes to Aurelia to propose in front of everyone in Portuguese (her native language which he learned just for this proposal) at the restaurant where she works. Meanwhile the prime minister goes knocking on every door to find Natalie, and then later kisses her in front of all of the audience members while on stage. Heterosexual women are perceived as being easily swayed by a man who makes an effort to be with her and who is not afraid to confess his love for her in front of a group of people. The expectation in the US, as well as other countries of the core Anglosphere, is that one partner, usually

the man, will formalize the relationship with a marriage proposal (Baker & Elizabeth, 2014). This means that women will often wait around for the man to progress the couple towards the next step of their relationship.

For a more classic display of love, in *A Bride for Christmas* Aiden gets down on one knee and proposes to Jamie on Christmas day (after only knowing her for four weeks) in front of her entire family and then immediately has a wedding ceremony staged in the house. Even though the only reason why Aiden pursued Jamie in the first place was to win a bet, since he is promising to commit to her through this grand display of affection, she takes him back. When men pull off these stunts, they are sometimes attempting to erase any previous wrongs that they have done to the women, suggesting that if men put effort into a big romantic gesture then all will be forgiven. Still, men should be held accountable for their actions and should not simply be able to start over time and time again by wooing women with romance. Conversely, in *Holidate* (2020) she is the one to make the big speech to win the guy over after previously turning him down. This indicates that more recent movies attempt to flip the script by having women instead of men stage elaborate displays of affection.

V. Conclusion

The main purpose of this thesis is to analyze the romantic comedy Christmas genre and its subject-matter with two central questions in mind. The first concentrating on what these films communicate to audiences about gender norms and romantic relationships. While the second question focuses on what gender roles and expectations mainstream American holiday movies perpetuate. My findings suggest that Christmas romantic comedy films mirror and reinforce American cultural values of heterosexual coupling, marriage and family, while discouraging as well as stigmatizing single life and endorsing the traditional role of women in the home and not in the workforce. Overall these depictions place the female protagonist out of the big city and office spaces and into the small-town American home, where she is meant to fulfill a gender normative passive role while her husband leads the way. All of the romantic conventions that present women as passive and men as active in these films—such as love being unexpected, the idea of soulmates/destiny, and elaborate displays of affection—create an expectation that women are to wait for their special man to romance them into the next stage of life, marriage and then eventually family. And even though it is ultimately the female lead who makes these decisions (and the gay male lead in the *Christmas Set-Up*), like moving to a small-town or giving up their dream job, these life changes are never sacrifices that heterosexual male characters are forced to make. These movie portrayals reinforce gender

roles within heterosexual relationships and prevent women from living more independent lifestyles. Hence being able to have it all—as in a career, a marriage and a family—or being happily single is not represented as attainable in these movies. Furthermore, although there are so many Christmas films, they typically tend to feature a limited demographic segment of heterosexual, middle and upper class, White, conventionally attractive, able-bodied characters in their late twenties or early thirties (Hundley, 2000; Brayton, 2021; Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). In the US where dating, marriage and family come in many different forms, these films can feel excluding to many people with their limited portrayals of the American population.

In short, these female leads who place high importance on being in a relationship around the holidays and are willing to leave everything behind, including their careers, for love are symbols of the “Christmas spirit” that rejects capitalist greed and reinstates our urges to couple during the Christmas season. However, it is important to note that in reality, “women are happier when they have both career and family” (Hewlett, 2002, p. 69). So why do these women have to choose in order to have an exceptional Christmas? The cultural perception that being single is a “problem” for women (Burgeon, 2016) is continuously stressed in these Christmas romantic comedy films by pushing female leads into heterosexual relationships and into the home. Even though more recent films including LGBTQ+ and racially diverse characters offer better representation, the importance of romance and what has erroneously been labeled as “the traditional family” along with normative gender roles remain at the forefront of this genre.

VI. References

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Appendix A: Films Reviewed

A Bride for Christmas (2012)

A Christmas Prince (2017)

A Princess for Christmas (2012)

Christmas on the Bayou (2013)

Christmas on Wheels (2020)

Four Christmases (2008)

Happiest Season (2020)

Holidate (2020)

Last Holiday (2006)

Love Actually (2003)

The Christmas Contract (2018)

The Christmas Setup (2020)

The Holiday (2006)

The Perfect Holiday (2007)

The Princess Switch (2018)