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Beyond the Books: An Ethnographic Exploration of How Libraries Mirror and Mend Inequality in the City of Boston

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines how libraries in Boston reflect and respond to the communities they serve. Using participant observation at four sites, Boston Public Library's Copley Branch, the North End Library, Roxbury Community College Library, and Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library, my research documents the physical environment, patron demographics, social interactions, and available services at each location. My findings reveal that libraries function as more than repositories of books; they are dynamic barometers of community need, identity, and inequality. While public libraries are often celebrated as equalizing institutions, they remain deeply intertwined with the social and economic disparities of their neighborhoods. Yet, they can also challenge these inequities through targeted programming, community outreach, and inclusive design. Academic libraries, meanwhile, reflect their institutions' cultures, resources, and student populations, often prioritizing academic support over broader community engagement. Across all sites, this study underscores the role of libraries as both mirrors and potential agents of social change. Transforming them into instruments of equity will require systemic reforms, including equitable funding, supportive policy, and a rejection of the myth of institutional neutrality.

Keywords: library social infrastructure, urban inequality, third space theory, cultural capital, Boston, USA

Libraries have always been more than repositories of books; they are living reflections of the communities they serve. While their origins date back to ancient Mesopotamia and the clay tablets of the third millennium BCE, and later to monumental institutions such as the Library of Alexandria, their role has continually evolved in tandem with societal needs (Jiménez and Frahm 2013). Over the centuries, libraries have evolved from elite private collections that reinforced class divisions to public institutions designed to expand access to knowledge, now serving as multifaceted spaces that offer not just literature but also technology, social services, and community programming.

In the United States, the 19th and 20th centuries saw the transformation of libraries into cornerstones of public education, literacy, and civic engagement (Wiegand 2015). Social libraries, spaces where people once gathered to exchange political ideas and participate in communal learning, are embedded in the DNA of today's public libraries. Yet, as accessible as they are in principle, libraries remain entwined with the social and economic inequalities of their surroundings. They often mirror the demographics, resources, and cultural norms of their neighborhoods, becoming both a reflection of and a response to local realities.

This ethnographic study of four Boston libraries, two public and two academics, was designed to explore this relationship not only along the axis of well-resourced versus under-resourced libraries, but to explore the contrast between the categories of academic versus public libraries. Libraries were selected to explore the economic and multicultural variations within Boston and to be representative of the city's diversity, despite the limited scale of this study. Through participant

observation, I examined the physical environment, patron demographics, social interactions, and available services at each site to understand how these spaces both reflect and shape their communities. The findings reveal that libraries are not just collections of books; they are barometers of community need, identity, and inequality. Public libraries, though often idealized as equalizers, are deeply embedded in the same structural inequities that define the neighborhoods they serve. At the same time, they possess the potential to resist these forces, particularly when they integrate social work practices, expand outreach, and design programming that acknowledges rather than erases difference (Kelley et al. 2017; Shepherd 2025).

This paper seeks to accomplish three goals. First, it highlights how the same institution is perceived differently across settings, architectures, rules, and user demographics, which shape the available "realms" and the type of Third Space that is possible (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Tatham 2025). Second, it ties meeting-place patterns to social-infrastructure stakes: whether branches produce transformative, bridging, or complexity-reducing spaces matters for equity (Philbin et al. 2019; Tatham 2025). Third, it centers on lived use, who studies with whom, who seeks help from whom, and how patrons move between high- and low-intensive activities as the evidence of bonding/bridging capital. Policy and program design can shape user interactions when forging the epicenters for change that we call libraries (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Rodriguez 2019).

For libraries to truly fulfill their democratic promise, not as mirrors of inequality but as tools to dismantle it, systemic changes are essential. Equitable funding, supportive policy frameworks, and a willingness to challenge the myth of institutional neutrality are critical. By documenting patterns across Boston's diverse library settings, this study sheds light on the larger sociological themes that shape not only these institutions but also the communities and urban landscapes in which they exist.

Literature Review

Libraries can be understood through a sociological framing that treats them as diverse civic arenas. Lyn Lofland (1998) identifies libraries as operating across a triad of social realms: public (characterized by civil inattention between strangers), parochial (neighbors chatting after children's programming), and private (families or friends sharing time), with norms shifting across these spheres. Oldenburg's (1999) theory of the "third place" further situates libraries as spaces that exist between the public and private, serving as informal community anchors. This role is reinforced by research showing that libraries function as low-threshold hangout spaces that foster community without requiring purchases (Aabø and Audunson 2012). Together, these theories explain how one building can host studying, childcare, civic discussion, and quiet respite without contradiction.

Wiegand (2015) asserts that libraries are not neutral spaces. The myth of neutrality obscures how libraries reflect dominant ideologies, reinforce norms, and reproduce hierarchies. Programming decisions, staff demographics, collection curation, and spatial design all express values and often align with dominant cultural standards. Throughout the past decades, research has steadily reframed the public library from a quiet "book place" into a flexible social institution—one that people actively shape through their daily use (Troll Covey 2002, 99–100). The rapid integration of technology has further accelerated the transformation of libraries, making technological access essential in efforts to remain relevant and to attract patrons who are unable to access technology personally (Pauget et al. 2024).

Ethnographic and observational studies further reveal how patrons toggle between intensely personal tasks, such as studying with a sibling or meeting a friend, and lighter, drop-in uses, such as reading the paper or returning books, often within the same visit. Libraries integrate books and technology, and thus function simultaneously as high-intensive and low-intensive meeting places (Zickuhr, Rainie, and Purcell 2013). A case study by the Urban

Library Council demonstrated that libraries need to become increasingly versed in redefining socialization to remain relevant in urban settings that set them far beyond locations of renting books (Urban Libraries Council 2024). Within this context, social capital becomes central to understanding what libraries make possible. The resources and other forms of social capital within a community can influence what libraries look like and what they can offer. A library may facilitate bonding capital while also fostering bridging social capital across different groups within a community, supporting both tight networks and thin connections across difference (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Williams et al. 2024).

Recent scholarship has also examined libraries through a public health and equity lens. A recent study of the UK and Philadelphia have demonstrated that in a post-COVID-19 world defined by new social norms, libraries provide communities of connection on the basis of public health as repositories of information on forms of healthcare support. This is particularly important as healthcare becomes increasingly compounded by complex bureaucracy (Karki et al. 2024; Hughes 2024). A public-health scoping review argues that libraries operate as meso-level infrastructure that address key benefits correlated with positive life outcomes, including early literacy, social support, job search, benefits navigation, and disaster response. These functions are especially significant because libraries are ubiquitous, free, and trusted environments that support healthy socialization across age groups in an increasingly polarized and socially isolated society (Klinenberg 2019). Understanding libraries through this public health lens highlights their role in advancing population health, particularly in high-disparity neighborhoods, and underscores the community benefits of supporting these social determinants (Philbin et al. 2019).

Howard (2019) similarly highlights libraries as "everything for everyone," from story time in the morning to research help at noon and overdose reversal in the afternoon. This narrative contributes to the broader "social infrastructure" framework, which views libraries

as platforms that bind communities together. If libraries are understood as social infrastructure, then their diverse programming, from naloxone centers to senior arts programming to voter registration, is not arbitrary, but rather central to maintaining the local safety net (Howard 2019; Klinenberg 2019).

Libraries have also gained prominence as resource providers and centers of immigrant belonging (Branyon 2017; Bausman 2016). Rodriguez's mixed-methods study of a library-school district partnership demonstrates how asset-based programming, including citizenship help, legal navigation, and civic awareness, can counteract subtractive, assimilationist attitudes and increase newcomer youths' sense of belonging. Rather than equating belonging with assimilation, Rodriguez theorizes belonging through the lived experiences of newcomer youths and shows how libraries function as democratic hubs for that work (Rodriguez 2019). Collectively, this scholarship positions libraries as modifiable and investible institutions with the capacity to influence population-level outcomes.

Theoretical Foundations

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2008 [1848], 67) famously argued that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." This insight remains pertinent when applied to public institutions such as libraries. Although libraries offer services freely, they do not operate outside capitalist structures. Wealthier communities generate higher local tax revenues and attract private donations, resulting in well-resourced libraries equipped with advanced technology, expansive collections, and robust programming. Conversely, libraries in economically disadvantaged areas often struggle with outdated materials, fewer programs, and underpaid staff. In this way, material inequality becomes directly visible through institutional infrastructure.

Max Weber's (1987) tripartite model of stratification, class, status, and party, adds further nuance by showing how economic capital, social prestige, and political influence

interact to shape access to resources and patterns of consumption. Communities with greater social capital and political engagement are better positioned to advocate for funding and policy support for cultural institutions. As Howard (2019) explains, wealthier communities are often able to sustain thriving libraries, whereas under-resourced areas may rely on libraries as their only accessible and safe public space. In this way, access to power and status operates alongside wealth in shaping institutional capacity.

How individuals appear in public through behaviors such as food consumption, dress, and leisure activities also reflects class and status distinctions. Veblen's (1889) theory of conspicuous consumption explains how individuals display wealth through public displays of expensive technology, clothing, and recreational practices. Pierre Bourdieu's (2021) concept of cultural capital further deepens this analysis by emphasizing that individuals and groups possess uneven distributions of embodied, objectified, and institutionalized knowledge and taste that shape social mobility. Libraries are repositories of cultural capital, yet the ability to navigate and fully utilize their offerings is not evenly distributed. Middle- and upper-class patrons often arrive already equipped to maximize library resources, while working-class patrons may rely on libraries as sites for building that capital. A librarian's example of shifting outreach as neighborhood demographics became more Hispanic, prompting the library to engage more with daycare centers as more women entered the workforce, illustrates how institutions adapt to evolving forms of cultural capital (Wheeler 2025). This reflects Bourdieu's insight that social structures both shape and are reshaped by the institutions that sustain them.

In addition to "third place" dynamics (Oldenburg 1999) and street-level discretion (Lipsky 1980), Homi K. Bhabha's concept of Third Space offers a lens for understanding how identities and practices are negotiated within libraries. Third Space refers to the in-between zone where cultural boundaries meet and blur, enabling new hybrid identities and knowledge to emerge through negotiation (Tatham 2025). In educational contexts, Third

Space has been applied in three ways: transformative, bridging, and complexity-reducing, ranging from spaces that disrupt dominant hierarchies to those that help individuals navigate existing institutional norms (Tatham 2025).

What this study adds—and the questions it advances

This ethnographic comparison across four Boston libraries (a downtown flagship, a neighborhood branch, a community-college library, and a research-university library) directly addresses the gaps above in three ways. First, it offers a within-city, cross-setting analysis that operationalizes the call for place-sensitive comparisons by linking observed uses to neighborhood demographics, building design, and local rules—evidence the health/equity literature explicitly says is missing (Philbin et al. 2019).

Second, it extends meeting-place theory by testing not only how the same institution navigates between public and private realms across different missions (public versus academic) but how inequality permeates the dimension of well-resourced (Copley flagship and BU) versus under resourced (Roxbury and North End branch) libraries; in doing so, it modernizes Lofland's three distinct realms in the context of libraries in a U.S. urban setting (Aabø and Audunson 2012).

Third, it complements program-centric accounts by focusing on lived use: who studies with whom, who asks for help, and how patrons transition between "high-intensive" and "low-intensive" activities in real time, micro-patterns that make bonding/bridging social capital visible and comparable across sites (Aabø and Audunson 2012).

Formally, the contribution is a place-based, cross-institutional ethnography that (a) operationalizes the idea of meso-level "social infrastructure" with comparative evidence, (b) adapts meeting-place/realm frameworks to divergent library missions, and (c) surfaces patterns relevant to equity investments and service design. It answers two guiding questions that current literatures leave open empirically:

- 1) How does the same institution operate in different settings with different access to resources?
- 2) How do different demographic groups use the same institution?

Methodology

This study employed participant observation, a qualitative ethnographic method in which the researcher enters a social setting not only to observe behavior, but also to participate in the everyday rhythms of the environment while documenting interactions, norms, and patterns of meaning-making (DeWalt 2011; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Unlike detached observation, participant observation requires the researcher to become physically and socially present within the setting being studied, engaging with the space as a temporary member of the environment while simultaneously analyzing it. In this project, I entered each library as a patron by sitting in common study areas, walking through the collections, observing public interactions, reading posted programming materials, and, in some locations, engaging in brief informal conversations with patrons and staff. This allowed me to understand not only what activities occurred in the libraries, but also how these spaces felt socially, how patrons navigated them, and how institutional norms shaped behavior.

The goal of participant observation in this study was to examine how libraries function as social infrastructures that both reflect and respond to neighborhood inequality. More specifically, I observed how patrons used space, interacted with one another, engaged with staff, accessed technology, and moved between different forms of activity such as studying, socializing, childcare, recreation, or resource-seeking. I was particularly interested in identifying visible differences between public and academic libraries and between well-resourced and under-resourced institutions.

Participant observation was conducted at four library sites across Boston during single 45–60 minute visits on the same Saturday afternoon: the Boston Public Library's Copley

branch, the North End Library, Roxbury Community College Library, and Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library. These sites were intentionally selected to reflect differences in institutional mission, neighborhood demographics, socioeconomic context, and available resources. Two were public libraries and two were academic libraries, allowing for comparison across institutional types.

Field notes were recorded immediately after each observation session to minimize disruption and avoid drawing attention to individual patrons. The observations focused on several recurring categories: estimated demographic composition (age, gender, race, and perceived socioeconomic status), use of technology, social interaction patterns, visible staff roles, noise level, spatial organization, use of public resources, and the relationship between the library and its surrounding neighborhood. I also documented moments that appeared sociologically significant or unexpected. These moments were analyzed as indicators of how libraries mediate community belonging, exclusion, and social support.

As with all ethnographic research, this study has limitations. The observations occurred during a limited timeframe and represent only snapshots of activity at each site. Patron demographics were estimated visually and may therefore contain subjective bias. Additionally, because observations were conducted during a single afternoon, they may not capture variations across weekdays, evenings, or seasonal programming. However, ethnographic methods prioritize depth of contextual understanding over statistical generalizability, making participant observation an appropriate method for examining how libraries operate as lived social environments (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

Academic Libraries

Mugar Memorial Library, situated in the Fenway neighborhood, was selected to represent large academic institutions and the substantial student population in Boston, where over 150,000 college students reside among a city of approximately 650,000. In Fenway, the majority

age group is 20–34 (64.6%), and nearly 40% of residents speak a language other than English. Approximately 39.3% of individuals live in group quarters, such as dormitories, and the median household income is \$47,500, with 27.6% of households earning less than \$14,999. The neighborhood reflects the concentration of younger, transient student populations, with high participation in educational and health-related industries (45.9%). Refer to Table 1 for a more detailed demographic breakdown.

Roxbury Community College Library represents the experience of smaller academic institutions serving local communities. Located in Roxbury, a historically Black neighborhood with a lower median income (\$42,500), the area has a plurality Black population (41.2%), and over 40% speak a language other than English. Only 9% of the population are college students, and approximately 74% have some college education but no accredited degree. This location provides insight into how libraries cater to nontraditional students and families in a working-class, racially diverse area with limited resources. Refer to Table 1 for a more detailed demographic breakdown.

Neighborhood	Roxbury	Fenway
Major Age Group	20–34 yrs (31.9%)	20–34 yrs (64.6%)
Largest Racial Group	Black (41.2%)	White (52.3%)
Native Born	74.1%	72.8%
Language Other than English	40.5%	39.1%
Major Educational Attainment	Some College (26.9%)	Some College (38.6%)
Labor Force Participation	58.1%	59.6%
Group Quarters %	9.0%	39.3%
% of Boston's Impoverished	12.5%	6.8%
Median Household Income	\$42 500 (24% <\$14,999)	\$47 500 (27.6% <\$14,999)

School	Roxbury Comm- unity College	Boston University
Institutional Ranking	Bottom 80%*	Top 9%*
Total Enrollment	2 447	17 590 (Undergrad)
Full-time Tuition**	In-state: \$416 Out of State: \$624	\$69 870
Socioeconomic Status	83% on Pell Grant	18.2 on Pell Grant
Demographics	Asian American: 19.6% African American: 4.1% Hispanic/Latino: 10.8% White: 34.4% International: 22.3% All other: 8.9%	Asian: 3.1% Black: 54.3% American Indian / Alaskan Na- tive: 1% Hispanic: 24.4% White: 8.7% Pacific Is- lander, Alaskan Na- tive, Indige- nous Per- son: 0.04% Non- resident

Table 1: Comparison of neighborhoods and institutions for academic libraries, Roxbury (Roxbury Community College) and Fenway (Boston University). Data from (Boston University Student Aid Profile 2021), (City of Boston Planning Department), (Full Tuition Figures | Admissions), (Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges 2019), (Roxbury Community Fast Facts 2025).

* (U.S. News and World Report 2025)

**12+ credits, without fees, other expenses, or health insurance.

Public libraries

The Boston Public Library (BPL), located in Copley Square, a neighborhood in the Back Bay, serves a diverse public audience and is Boston's flagship library being the main branch of all public libraries in Boston. Being the flagship, BPL supports its constituent branches with its extensive resources of both literature and community related items to encompass both

the responsibilities of being a library and ensuring the wellbeing of the connected branches. Back Bay is a wealthy area with a median household income of \$112 500; however, it has also experienced growing inequality, including a 20% increase in homelessness in 2023 (Roscoe 2024). The neighborhood's population is 72.1% White and largely native-born (78.2%), with 37.9% holding graduate degrees or higher. As such, the BPL represents the intersection of affluence, accessibility, and visible disparity in Boston's public life. Refer to Table 2 for a more detailed demographic breakdown.

The North End Library was selected as an example of a smaller, community-oriented public library in an exclusive and less transient neighborhood. The North End has a high median income of \$112 500, a predominantly White population (86.4%), and high educational attainment, with over 50% holding at least a bachelor's degree. The neighborhood is characterized by a high concentration of working professionals in business and management (over 40%) and a largely native-born population (86.9%). Over half of households are single-person dwellings, and the dominant age group is 20–34 years old (53.1%). Refer to Table 2 for a more detailed demographic breakdown. (Neighborhoods, Bostonplans.Org).

At each site, the observation period began with a survey of the library space, followed by unobtrusive participant observations from a vantage point that provided a view of the largest area of the library. This included being seated close to the entrance of the libraries to track the patrons entering and exiting the library. For the BPL and Mugar, I was seated on the second floor of the library to have a sense of the activity occurring throughout the space. This did limit me as I could not understand the entire ecosystem of the library as I was not moving around to see different patron interactions with resources. Regarding these spaces, I was able to see the entrance, people studying, interacting, utilizing community computers, and accessing the resource desk. For the libraries of Roxbury Community College and the North end, they were quaint, single

Neighborhood	Roxbury	Fenway
Major Age Group	20–34 yrs (41.0%)	20–34 yrs (53.1%)
Largest Racial Group	White (72.1%)	White (86.4%)
Native Born	78.2%	86.9%
Language Other than English	25.1%	18.9%
Major Educational Attainment	Grad+ (37.9%)	Bachelor's (52.5%)
Labor Force Participation	66.0%	80.4%
Group Quarters %	10.4%	1.8%
% of Boston's Impoverished	2.1%	1.0%
Median Household Income	\$112 500 (42% >\$150 000)	\$112 000 (27.6% >\$150 000)

Table 2: Comparison of neighborhoods for public libraries, Back Bay (Boston Public Library at Copley) and North End (North End Public Library). Data from (City of Boston Planning Department).

levels where I had the opportunity to seat myself in the center of the space to see patron interactions, resource usage and much of the library's full functioning due to its small size. Environmental features were recorded, including seating types, noise levels, access to technology, and the number of staff present. Demographic characteristics, such as patrons' approximate age, gender, race, and perceived socioeconomic status, were noted, as well as behaviors like working individually, engaging in social interaction, or using public computers. Library services, including after-school programming, language learning, and employment resources, were also cataloged. Unique or unexpected observations were recorded separately. After completing observations at all four sites, the notes were synthesized to draw comparisons and identify patterns in how these libraries serve their distinct user bases.

Emmanuel College's Committee for the Protection of Human Participants was informed of the project; however, no formal application or permission was required, as the data collection method was observational. No personally identifiable information was included in the data collection.

Observations

Boston Public Library-Copley Flagship

McKim Building

The McKim building exudes 19th-century grandeur, featuring marble staircases, mahogany shelves lined with leather-bound first editions, and the iconic Bates Hall, complete with embossed ceilings, marble busts, and wooden study tables. While the historic aesthetic dominates, discreetly placed outlets hint at modern adaptations. A security guard patrolled regularly, enforcing a no-food-or-drink rule.

Outside the building, tourists and students bustled past, while security discreetly moved homeless individuals toward the Boylston side of the building, often remaining outside the building but not entering the McKim building. Some of the patrons of lesser means who were sitting outside and either struck up conversations with the security guards or were socializing in large groups, indicating that this was a popular meeting place for these community members as there were 3-4 pockets of these patrons talking outside. Inside, approximately 170 patrons were young adults (ages 20–25), many of whom wore college merchandise, and the majority used Apple laptops. Around 20 older individuals, primarily white men in professional attire, were also present. Of the younger group, roughly 120 individuals appeared to be white, 50 were Asian, and 10 were Middle Eastern; approximately 75% were women. Many worked quietly in small groups.

Roughly 110 tourists, many from affluent backgrounds and of Asian or European descent, moved through the space, taking photos. Three reference librarians were available for book assistance, but community programming was limited, consisting mainly of an upscale lounge

and tearoom for exclusive events. The atmosphere conveyed an implicit sense of prestige and elite purpose.

Boylston Street Building

Modern and vibrant, this site features a café, GBH film set, children's library, public computers, and multiple floors of study areas. From the mezzanine, I observed the café, entrance, and children's section. Security guards greeted patrons, including five who appeared to be of lower socioeconomic means; some even knew patrons on a first-name basis. Among the visitors were three presumed nannies (older Hispanic women) with white children (surmised from the children referring to them as "miss" in the absence of traditional maternal colloquialisms), approximately 10 homeless individuals who knew the guards, and 19 people who appeared to be of lower socioeconomic status, gathered at public computers. The café bustled with both older adults and young people, some studying, others socializing. The individuals of lesser means and the nannies often stayed and chatted with the security guards having lengthy conversations while many other patrons didn't bother to react to the security guards greeting them with a "hello" or "welcome in."

Three help desks staffed with multiple librarians offered resources and hosted programs ranging from citizenship classes to youth mental health workshops, GED preparation, and financial empowerment. Flyers promoted LGBTQIA+ authors and political discussions. Tourists (about 50 during my observation) mingled with locals, and around 45 patrons studied quietly. Large glass windows revealed 15 homeless individuals outside in small groups. See Table 3 below for the summarized findings of ethnographic observations.

North End Library

Nestled between restaurants and situated across from an Italian coffee and spice shop, the North End Library reflects the neighborhood's historic character. A brick façade and religious statue greet visitors. Inside, the small, well-kept space is divided into

adult and children's sections, with two librarians at the front and a security guard managing building access.

During my observation, 10–15 patrons were present: five older white men and approximately 10 younger white adults (ages 25–30), all using MacBooks, none of whom appeared to be students. Six of eight younger women wore workout attire and carried yoga mats. There were also children, noticeably dressed in upscale brands, accompanied by adults who were often addressed as "miss," suggesting non-parent caregivers, like the Boyleston Street building of the Copley library. The caretakers, presumably nannies, were interacting with the library staff with familiarity, indicating that they take the children here often. The caretakers themselves also had familiar intersections with each other as they let the children meander the library, another indication of relationship building between community members in the common meeting place of the library.

Younger patrons kept to themselves, while the older men conversed in Italian about soccer, switching to English to study for the U.S. citizenship exam. Services included children's movie nights, chair yoga, and after-school homework help. Interactions between librarians and guests were minimal. Outside, foot traffic was steady with locals and tourists visiting nearby eateries. Approximately 10 visitors stopped by briefly to view the library before leaving. This was a relatively uneventful Saturday afternoon as this is not a sought-after location by students due to its secluded location in a mature residential community. However, it drew tourists and regular patrons, like Copley, but on a significantly smaller scale. See Table 3 below for the summarized findings of ethnographic observations.

Roxbury Community College Library

Located on the second floor of a campus building, this extensive, modernized library offers numerous study rooms, tables, and computers. The circulation desk is centrally located, staffed by three librarians, and surrounded by flyers advertising various events. African art pieces line the glass walls, and a

classroom hosted a financial management session during my visit. A small children's section is well-stocked with books and activities. Roughly 20 patrons were present at any one time, ranging from young adults to older learners. The majority were Black or Hispanic; I was one of two white individuals. Seven children used the children's area independently while nearby adults, often in work uniforms, studied or worked. The atmosphere was quiet, yet friendly, with patrons greeting one another as they arrived. Many stayed only 30–45 minutes. Technology use leaned toward Chromebooks, often loaned by the library. Services included free textbook lending (with near-complete coverage for courses), book and short story clubs, current events discussions, productivity workshops, and a 24-hour virtual librarian. The library is located in a residential area, near a grocery store, T-stop, community church, and Islamic center and had a very community-oriented vibe as many of the students knew each other, most likely due to the small size of the college, with many of the students being from the nearby neighborhoods. Not only were the patrons using the library, but among those also who brought their children, I noticed that the kids were interacting with each other, and I had the opportunity to make some small talk with the patrons about their experiences of the community college. Of the few patrons I spoke to, they were here to study between going to work or other responsibilities outside of college.

Boston University–Mugar Memorial Library

The main library for Boston University spans six floors, housing specialized collections in African American studies, astronomy, music, science, engineering, archaeology, and geology. The space is more traditional than modern, with large communal tables and individual study areas.

During my one-hour observation, around 50 students occupied the second floor at any given time, with another 80 passing through. Most appeared to be in their early to mid-20s, with a few older graduate students also present. Over half were non-white and female. Technology

use favored MacBooks and gaming laptops (the latter mainly among men).

Students primarily worked alone at shared tables, surrounded by textbooks, coffee, and take-out food. Rarely did students from other social circles interact with other groups, and I only had brief interactions with other students, most of whom were my age. Staff provided research and writing assistance, but few students used the resources they had to offer during my observation, and the reference desks were inundated with signage promoting special collections, such as the Martin Luther King Jr. Reading Room and the CAS 150 Historical Archive. Similar to the North End library, this was an uneventful afternoon with many students busy working, as expected near the midterm period.

Located on Commonwealth Avenue with views of the Charles River and Cambridge, the library is surrounded by BU facilities, coffee shops, convenience stores, and the Green Line T with many residents and Boston University students passing by the library and threw with very little interactions between each other nor the library staff, that did not provoke the same community orientation as the Roxbury Community College library.

Comparative Analysis Along the Axes of Academic v. Public and Well-Resourced v. Under-Resourced Across Boston's library landscape, the contrast is stark between academic and public institutions, as well as between affluent and under-resourced libraries. These spaces not only reflect the demographics and needs of the communities they serve but also embody deeper social, economic, and cultural divides.

Academic vs. Public Libraries: The Institutional Divide

The built environments and locations of academic and public libraries immediately signal their institutional roles. BU's Mugar Memorial Library is situated on Commonwealth Avenue, surrounded by coffee shops and in view of both the Prudential building and the Charles River, symbolically positioned within Boston's academic and economic elite. In contrast to the Mugar library, the Roxbury Community College Library is embedded within

Library	Location & Setting	Patrons & Demographics	Interactions & Behaviors	Services	Surrounding Area
Boston Public Library – McKim Building	Historic 19th-century architecture, Bates Hall, marble staircases, mahogany shelves.	~170 young adults (20–25), mostly white & Asian; 20 older white men. 110 affluent tourists (Asian/European).	Quiet study in small groups; tourists taking photos; atmosphere of prestige.	3 reference librarians; minimal programs; exclusive lounge/tearoom.	Copley Square; tourist-heavy; homeless individuals moved aside by security.
Boston Public Library – Boylston Street Building	Modern café, GBH film set, children's library, public computers.	~150 people, of a diverse mix of ages, races, SES; 10 homeless individuals, 19 using public computers; ~50 tourists.	Quiet study on upper floors; café socializing; regular presence of homeless patrons.	3 help desks; classes (citizenship, youth mental health, GED, finance); LGBTQIA+ support; homework help.	Glass façade facing street; visible homeless presence; Copley commercial area.
North End Library	A small, older building with a historic feel, featuring a brick façade and a religious statue.	5 older white men; ~10 younger white adults (25–30), upscale attire; children with caregivers.	Minimal interaction among young patrons; older men socializing in Italian; a quiet overall atmosphere.	Children's movie night, chair yoga, and homework help.	Surrounded by Italian restaurants, cafés, and light tourist traffic.
Roxbury Community College Library	Extensive, modernized campus library with study rooms, art displays, and a children's section.	~20 patrons at a time; mostly Black/Hispanic; some in work uniforms; children using play area.	Warm, friendly atmosphere; short visits common; greetings exchanged.	Free textbook lending, book clubs, current events talks, and a 24-hour online librarian.	Residential area near grocery store, T stop, church, and Islamic center.
Boston University – Mugar Memorial Library	Six floors, specialized collections, traditional study spaces.	~50 students at once, mostly 20s; >50% non-white; some grad students; MacBooks/gaming laptops.	Mostly solitary study with light conversation; long study sessions.	Research/writing help; special collections (MLK Jr. Room, historical archives).	Commonwealth Ave; views of Charles River; surrounded by BU buildings, coffee shops, Green Line T.

a residential neighborhood with a median household income of \$32,000, where many households include children (City of Boston Planning Department). Its smaller, modernized space emphasizes accessibility and proximity, with centrally placed reference desks and multipurpose study areas designed to serve immediate educational and community needs. Public libraries reflect a different institutional logic. Copley's grandeur, split between the historic McKim building and the modern Boylston addition, stands in sharp contrast to the North End Library's modest, outdated interior wedged between restaurants and niche grocers. While academic libraries prioritize scholarly specialization and institutional insulation, public libraries balance neighborhood access, civic visibility, and community integration.

Demographic patterns further distinguish these institutional types. Academic libraries reflect their student populations but in different ways. BU's patrons were predominantly young adults in their 20s and 30s, with a majority being female and of Asian or Middle Eastern descent, with no children present. At Roxbury, most patrons were Black or Hispanic, and the age range was much broader, spanning from children to older adult learners. Many arrived straight from work, often still in food service or labor uniforms. Public libraries more directly mirrored neighborhood wealth and cultural heritage. Copley drew a racially diverse mix of Asian, Middle Eastern, and white European patrons split between young adults and older users. The North End was almost entirely white, with older men speaking Italian and younger women in upscale athleisure carrying yoga mats. Clothing and personal technology reinforced these differences, with Apple products near-universal at BU, rare at Roxbury, and luxury brands common in the North End.

Patterns of social interaction also reflected institutional structure. Roxbury's smaller scale and community focus fostered warmth, with patrons greeting strangers, chatting about families and jobs, and using the reference desk heavily, about half of all users during observation. At BU, students sat in groups but largely remained within them, rarely acknowledging others, reflecting the anonymity

of a much larger student body. Public library behavior varied by setting. In Copley's McKim building, the atmosphere was formal and tense, with many students frantically typing or studying under the pressure to maintain academic decorum, while Boylston's café area allowed for more casual interaction. The North End was quieter among younger patrons, but older men studying for citizenship exams engaged in visible sociability.

Differences in access and inclusion further illustrate the institutional divide. Copley's Boylston building provided a visible space for unhoused patrons, many of whom were on a first-name basis with the security staff and regularly used public computers, social programs, and the café. In contrast, the McKim building saw unhoused individuals redirected toward Boylston, preserving its aesthetic for tourists and students. Neither the North End Library nor the academic libraries included unhoused patrons in any visible capacity, the latter due to formal institutional access restrictions. Academic libraries thus operated as closed systems tied to enrollment and affiliation, while public libraries retained porous boundaries, albeit unevenly applied.

Tourism shaped public library space but bypassed academic libraries entirely. The McKim building functioned as both a library and a destination, with as many tourists, primarily from Asia or Europe, as students. Many posed for Instagram-worthy photos, dressed to match the historic aesthetic. Boylston's visitors were more family-oriented, using the café or restrooms. North End tourists were primarily white and stopped briefly for directions or facilities, reflecting the neighborhood's role as a heritage site rather than a scholarly destination.

Programming further reinforced institutional purpose. BU's offerings, including poetry readings and historical exhibitions, reinforced its academic prestige. Roxbury prioritized the lived experience of its patrons, offering 24-hour online librarian access, free textbook loans, productivity classes, and discussions on current events and policy changes affecting healthcare and food assistance. Copley offered a hybrid model in its programming, combining citizenship classes, youth mental health workshops, and LGBTQIA+ author spotlights

that blended educational and community-support functions. The North End focused on leisure activities such as chair yoga, movie nights, and children's story hours, alongside citizenship classes that reflected the specific needs of its community.

Well-Resourced vs. Under-Resourced Libraries: The Economic Divide

Well-resourced libraries, BU and Copley, were defined by scale, symbolism, and institutional investment. BU's multi-floor specialized collections and Copley's architectural grandeur, particularly in the McKim building, reflected concentrated economic and cultural capital. These spaces conveyed prestige through both physical magnitude and symbolic authority. In contrast, under-resourced libraries, Roxbury and the North End, were smaller and more spatially constrained. Roxbury emphasized efficient accessibility within limited square footage, while the North End's outdated interior reflected minimal reinvestment, despite being located in one of the city's most affluent neighborhoods.

Technology, clothing, and visible wealth further distinguished these economic conditions. Apple products were near-universal at BU and common at Copley, but rare at Roxbury. Luxury brands (high fashion like Burberry and Louis Vuitton) were the norm in the North End, while Roxbury patrons often arrived in work uniforms, signaling economic precarity rather than leisure-driven usage. Copley displayed the widest socioeconomic mix, ranging from students and tourists to unhoused individuals, highlighting its position as both a symbolic and functional civic space that crossed class boundaries.

The social functions of these libraries diverged along economic lines. Roxbury functioned as a true community hub, with heavy reference desk use and interpersonal warmth shaping daily activity. The North End functioned as a quiet leisure space serving a homogeneous and economically comfortable population. BU and Copley, by contrast, operated as large-scale productivity zones, particularly in Mugar and McKim, where

academic and professional performance dominated behavior.

Programming also functioned as a signal of material need. Well-resourced libraries emphasized enrichment, through academic exhibitions at BU and cultural programming at Copley. Under-resourced libraries emphasized survival infrastructure. Roxbury's productivity resources, policy discussions, and textbook access addressed immediate structural barriers faced by its patrons. The North End's leisure-oriented programming reflected a community with fewer urgent socioeconomic demands, even as it maintained services such as citizenship classes.

Academic libraries functioned as insulated ecosystems, highly resourced but restricted to institutional members, reinforcing their role as exclusive spaces of scholarly production. Public libraries, by contrast, remained porous civic spaces where students, tourists, caregivers, unhoused individuals, and elderly residents intersected. Yet even among public institutions, inclusion varied sharply by neighborhood wealth and social need. Copley's blend of grandeur and grassroots services stood in contrast to the North End's comfortable but insular character. Roxbury and BU further illustrated how institutional mission and economic conditions dictate not only who uses the library, but whether it serves as a space of survival, connection, leisure, or elite productivity.

Discussion

Public libraries have long been understood as institutions of knowledge and inclusivity, offering free access to information and resources regardless of socioeconomic status. However, closer examination reveals that these institutions often mirror the very societal inequalities they aim to bridge. Disparities in funding, resources, and services across libraries underscore broader class structures and power dynamics. This research highlights that while libraries are often perceived as neutral, they in fact reflect and perpetuate social inequalities through differences in funding, architectural space, programming, and cultural access.

Prior work on libraries as meeting places helps explain how this occurs in practice. The same building can operate as a quiet “private” bubble, a parochial neighborhood hub, and a fully public realm among strangers, often all in the same day (Aabø and Audunson 2012). This was visible within the Boston Public Library itself, where the McKim building functioned as a high-prestige, quiet academic space dominated by young adults with Apple laptops and affluent tourists photographing the architecture, while unhoused individuals were redirected toward the more informal Boylston Street building. By contrast, the Boylston side fostered open social interaction through its café, children’s area, public computers, and social programming, where unhoused patrons, nannies, families, and students visibly coexisted. Public health scholarship extends this frame by arguing that libraries function as meso-level social infrastructure that shapes social determinants of health; when resources and programs are unevenly distributed across neighborhoods, so too are health-relevant benefits (Philbin et al. 2019). Popular and policy writing echoes this shift, documenting how branches are increasingly expected to be “everything for everyone,” from story hours to overdose response (Howard 2019).

The trends and countertrends identified across the four Boston libraries illustrate the core sociological theories outlined by Karl Marx, Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, and Thorstein Veblen. Alongside contemporary ethnographic observation, this analysis reveals how libraries both reflect and reinforce broader patterns of social stratification—while in some cases also serving as platforms for bridging across difference (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Philbin et al. 2019). These patterns were visible in clothing, technology, and use of space: Apple laptops and leisure-driven usage at BU and the North End contrasted with Chromebooks, work uniforms, and short, task-oriented visits at Roxbury Community College.

During observations, librarians at both Copley and Roxbury Community College emphasized that modern public libraries increasingly function as frontline social service providers addressing homelessness, mental health crises, and substance use. This shift was directly observable at the Boylston Street

building, where unhoused patrons were known by name to security guards and consistently utilized public computers and social service programs, while similar individuals were physically displaced from the McKim building. Howard (2019) describes the typical scope of this labor: a librarian may run story hour in the morning, assist with research at noon, and administer life-saving aid during an overdose in the afternoon, illustrating expanding responsibilities without matching funding or training. This aligns with public health scholarship conceptualizing libraries as community-level infrastructures whose programming, including benefits navigation, early literacy, and crisis response, has direct population health implications (Philbin et al. 2019). Copley’s full-time social worker and Roxbury’s intensive support programming reflect this structural shift toward survival-oriented infrastructure.

While theory provides a robust framework, ethnographic observation across Boston-area libraries confirms how these dynamics unfold in lived experience. The four-case studies function as microcosms of how libraries operate as barometers of inequality shaped by the patrons they serve. At Roxbury, warmth, greetings, and consistent reference desk use reflected a community-oriented space where patrons studied between work and caregiving responsibilities. By contrast, at BU’s Mugar Memorial Library, students worked largely in isolation at shared tables, rarely acknowledging other groups, reinforcing the anonymity and productivity-driven norms of an elite academic institution (Bedford 2024).

This gap between perceived neutrality and lived complexity is further revealed through the lens of street-level bureaucracy. As Howard (2019) and Wahler et al. (2020) argue, librarians increasingly perform duties once reserved for trained professionals as social safety nets fray. At the frontline of this transformation are Lipsky’s (1980) street-level bureaucrats, who interpret policy in real time, deciding which rules to enforce, which services to prioritize, and whom to help first. This discretion was most visible at Copley-Boylston and Roxbury, where staff actively facilitated access to social services and educational resources, while

McKim, North End, and Mugar largely presupposed patrons' existing cultural capital and institutional familiarity.

These patterns are also legible through Marxist and Weberian frameworks. Libraries operate within capitalist funding structures that privilege affluent communities with stronger tax bases and donor networks, resulting in unequal access to space, technology, and programming. As observed, Copley and BU displayed architectural magnitude, specialized collections, and technological saturation, while Roxbury and the North End reflected material constraint and limited reinvestment. Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption further illuminates how patrons signal class distinction through visible technologies, clothing, and leisure practices, patterns that surfaced clearly in the observational data.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital further explains how uneven familiarity with institutional norms shapes who benefits most from library resources (Bourdieu et al. 2021). Middle- and upper-class patrons at BU, McKim, and the North End arrived already equipped to maximize institutional offerings, while working-class patrons at Roxbury relied on the library as a site for building that capital through textbook access, productivity workshops, and current-events discussions.

The Third Space framework further clarifies how these negotiations unfold inside library environments. Copley-Boylston and Roxbury routinely cultivate bridging Third Spaces by honoring patrons' lived repertoires through citizenship clinics, multilingual programming, and social-service navigation. In contrast, McKim, North End, and Mugar more often reflect complexity-reduction dynamics that assume or subtly enforce dominant cultural literacies. Recent scholarship cautions that when the Third Space is invoked merely to harmonize patron practices with institutional norms, it risks becoming gentrifying rather than transformative (Tatham 2025).

Together, these findings demonstrate that libraries simultaneously reproduce and resist inequality. They reflect broader systems of class, power, and culture while also offering limited but meaningful opportunities for social bridging, especially when institutional resources

are intentionally aligned with community needs. Rather than functioning as neutral civic spaces, libraries emerge from this analysis as contested infrastructures where inequality is both visible and, at times, actively negotiated.

Conclusion

Libraries are not just collections of books; they are barometers of community need, identity, and inequality. Idealized as equalizers, public libraries are nonetheless entwined with the structures that stratify social life. Classic sociological theory helps name the mechanisms at work: Marx links institutional capacity to material conditions and class struggle; Weber reminds us that status and political leverage shape who can secure resources; Veblen examines how products of capitalism and activities of social life are utilized to illustrate status in society publicly; and Bourdieu shows how cultural capital—already held or acquired—conditions who finds a library intuitive versus alienating (Marx et.al, 1848/2009; Weber and Matthews 1978; Veblen 1889; Bourdieu, 1984). On the ground, librarians operate as Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats, translating policy into practice through everyday discretion—deciding which rules to enforce, which crises to prioritize, and how to welcome (or unintentionally deter) different patrons (Lipsky, 1980). These observations make these abstractions visible: the "same" institution reads differently across McKim, Boylston, North End, RCC, and Mugar, because architecture, rules, user mix, and local histories bend what a library is in practice (Aabø and Audunson, 2012).

This confounding complexity reorients the myth of neutrality. Libraries cannot be neutral if their material, symbolic, and discretionary features differentially enable, or foreclose, transformative Third Spaces. Yet they also hold the real capacity to resist inequality. Embedding social work, expanding multilingual and community-co-designed programming, and designing spaces that welcome high-intensity and low-intensity uses side by side are practical moves that align with what the evidence suggesting libraries already do well when supported (Howard 2019; Wahler et al. 2020;

Aabø and Audunson 2012). However, durable change requires system-level commitments, including equitable and transparent funding formulas, policy frameworks that recognize libraries' roles in health and safety, and appropriate staffing that treats libraries as a site of justice rather than merely a quiet triage (Philbin et al. 2019).

Finally, this study clarifies the two-grounding questions of this ethnography that literature raises but rarely answers within a single city: How does the same institution appear in different settings? And how do different demographic groups use the theoretically same institution? These findings suggest the answer turns on how branches assemble place, policy, and people to produce either transformative, bridging, or complexity-reducing Third Spaces—and on whether staff discretion, resources, and design choices widen or narrow pathways to cultural capital in practice (Aabø and Audunson 2012; Philbin et al. 2019; Tatham 2025). With equitable investment and explicit attention to Third Space possibilities, public libraries can move from mirroring inequality to deliberately, measurably, and locally dismantling it.

Future research could build on the practical and theoretical findings from this study and further address the research questions outlined here, in part by expanding the time frame and methodologies employed in this project. Suggestions include:

1. Mixed-methods expansion:

Pair comparative observation with semi-structured interviews (patrons, librarians, social-work partners) and short intercept surveys to capture perceived inclusion. This directly addresses the measurement gap in the health/social-infrastructure literature (Philbin et al., 2019).

2. Operationalize Third Place:

Develop and pilot indicators for transformative, bridging, and complexity-reducing dynamics. (Tatham, 2025).

3. Administrative and spatial data:

Incorporate branch-level metrics and neighborhood indicators (transit access,

housing cost burden) to model how resources and context shape use (Philbin et al., 2019).

4. Equity-focused evaluation:

Use a pre-post experiment to evaluate the effects of libraries adding social workers, extending hours, or launching citizen-led initiatives to test the impact on access and bridging the capital gap.

5. Comparative replication:

Replicate the design across additional branches and cities to test portability and refine typologies of space, programming, and discretion.

Taken together, these steps move from a rich descriptive baseline to actionable evidence about how the "same" institution appears and can be re-made across settings and groups, advancing the comparative questions this study evaluates.

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Experiences of Trans Joy in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of joy in trans individuals based in the UK to counter the damage-centred narratives that dominate trans research. In its attempt to respond to calls for complex, desire-based research, this paper uses ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and a narrative interview approach, to highlight stories of how trans individuals experience joy both because of and despite their marginalised identity. This research is situated within the wider UK socio-political context of increasing transphobia, as well as the broader academic context of trans studies and the anthropology of wellbeing and the good life. Through its examination of the joy of self-determination, language, embodiment, and affirming relationships, this paper argues that research on the trans experience should not be limited to the damage-centred narratives that currently dominate trans research, due to the negative effects this epistemic foreclosure has both on the individual and the community.

Keywords: Trans joy, epistemic foreclosure, autoethnography, United Kingdom

"The things that I have valued from my transition are not that I've got like, boobs now. It's that I have got a voice" (Clara)

This research project responds to Tuck's (2009), Shuster and Westbrook's (2022), and Holloway's (2023) calls for research that resists the current damage-centred narratives that pathologize transness, homogenise experiences, and entrench external beliefs onto community experiences. By actively shifting the paradigm to focus on what Tuck (2009, 419) calls a "desire-based research framework," this paper draws on ethnographic interactions with trans people living in England to add to our understanding of the "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of [the] lived lives" of marginalised and underrepresented people in social research. Through its phenomenological ontology and use of participant-focused methods, such as interviews and co-production, this project counters the existing epistemic foreclosure — the focus on certain knowledge systems to the detriment of the research group — and contributes to the growing understanding of the importance of joy and happiness within social studies of personhood, identity, and gender.

It should be acknowledged that 'joy' is an incredibly complicated term, and whilst definitions of joy were explored in my interviews, there is currently not the scope to address the intricacies offered by my participants. For this paper, joy is defined as "an emotional state [that] is always about something, and usually, this is news about something good in one's life. Joy is a response to some good object" (Emmons 2020, 2). This is not an all-encompassing definition; it focuses on the emotional reaction and does not account for the physical, as other definitions

have (Johnson 2020). However, as this paper primarily focuses on participants' subjective understanding of the self, an emotion-based definition of joy is helpful.

Socio-Political Context

This project comes at an increasingly strained time for the UK trans community. Since I became invested in my local community, I, alongside many others, have become steadily more concerned over the increasing prevalence of transphobia at a national, institutional, and local level; a sentiment that was previously supported by a UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023).

Trans-related discussions have become part of increasingly socially and politically divisive debates, colloquially referred to as 'culture wars.' The full scope of the trans culture war cannot be explored here. In short, one of its main fault lines is the response from Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists to legislation such as the Gender Recognition Act. This stems from their belief that the "self-declaration of gender will reduce the safety and well-being of cis women" (Hines 2020, 706). Duffy et al's (2021) examination of culture wars (Figure 1) highlighted how contentious this issue has become, with an equal split between those who believe trans rights have gone as far as they should and those who think trans rights have not gone far enough.

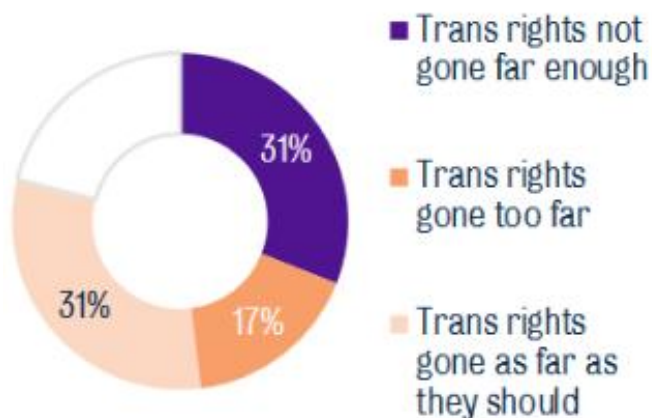


Figure 1 – Duffy et al. (2021, 4). The white section refers to those who answered, "Don't know" or "Prefer not to say."

The debate has only worsened in recent years, especially following the Supreme Court's ruling on *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* (2025) and the release of the *Independent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People* in April 2024. Despite severe public and academic backlash, both have led to changes in the legal rights and medical support offered to trans people in the UK, causing a drastic decrease in feelings of safety for many (BBC News 2024; *TransActual CIC and another -v- Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and another* 2024; Human Rights Watch 2025). A partial reason for the increasingly divisive and extreme positions within these debates comes from the epistemic foreclosure created by the prioritisation of damage-centred narratives. Therefore, whilst it is not the full solution, I argue that a focus on the joy and complex issues of personhood experienced as part of the trans lived experience is vital to add depth to these crucial debates.

Academic Context

Joy

Anthropology's focus on joy as a valid area of study is a recent development, one brought about through examination of the field's problematic past (Robbins 2013, Thin 2010). Whereas emotions were initially considered "too individualistic and psychological" for the anthropological approach, they have now become an area through which anthropologists examine social and cultural differences (Robbins 2013, 23).

There is a broad range of sociological and anthropological approaches to emotions, many of which engage with the debate over whether the origins of emotions are "not in human biology but in culture" and the effect this has (Turner 2009, 341). A shared claim across these approaches is that emotions are, to an extent, socially patterned, morally regulated, and intertwined with societal relationships, instead of being solely private, internal states of being. Anthropological approaches investigate how emotions are learned through everyday practises, and embedded in culturally specific systems of meaning-making through which individuals interpret social situations and moral

obligations (Lutz and White 1986). Hochschild's (1979; 1983) sociological work on "emotion cultures" and "feeling rules" also examines how societies and institutions prescribe what individuals should feel and how those feelings should be expressed. This is painfully relevant to the concept of trans joy due to the dominant narratives of suffering, regulation, and marginalisation that restrict which emotions are viewed as culturally intelligible within the trans community.

Epistemic Foreclosure

Tuck (2009) argues that the damage-centred research carried out on marginalised groups, though often well intentioned, perpetuates a form of academic violence, as it homogenises the experiences of diverse groups. Shuster and Westbrook (2022) develop this further with their focus on epistemic foreclosure. This refers to when certain knowledge systems, approaches, and focuses become prioritised over others, which perpetuates the status quo and reinforces inequalities. Combining damage-centred research and epistemic foreclosures within research into marginalised groups is dangerous as, "if the main story told about a group is that their lives are filled with trauma, discrimination, and violence, then that is likely what most people believe about the group, including members of the group itself" (Shuster and Westbrook 2022, 5). This can have damaging effects on both the individual and the community, as it forces us into a "homogenous subjecthood," deflects "attention from possible solutions," and defines our identities as a "potentially unliveable category defined by fear" (Westbrook 2021, 15–16).

This perspective has been perpetuated by the classification of trans people as an ethically vulnerable research group (Shaw et al. 2020). While heightened ethical awareness is essential, researchers must also be mindful that attempts to protect communities do not further silence or remarginalize their voices (Robbins 2013; Shuster and Westbrook 2022). It is these categorisations that this paper aims to push back against through its simultaneously inclusive and ethically responsive methodology, as the deeply complex and human nature of

trans people's experiences of joy, identity, and personhood can no longer be ignored.

Trans Studies

The complexity of gender has been a seminal field for anthropological work, epitomised by Butler's (1993) groundbreaking text, *Bodies That Matter*, wherein they argued that gender was not innate but a performative act by individuals and their societies. This was supported by Strathern's (1998) *The Gender of the Gift*, and Moore's (1994) *A Passion for Difference*. Strathern's (1988) focus on multiplicity, Butler's (1993) focus on performativity, and Moore's (1994) focus on positionality all supported the growing trans movement, which saw gender and the gendered body as processual, fragmented, and in continual construction.

These works, along with many others, became the focus of what is now called gender studies, a field that focuses on what the experiences of and interactions between cis men and women can reveal. A subsequent branch of gender studies, queer theory, aimed to challenge "hegemonic understandings of the relations between identity, sex, gender and sexuality" (Morland and Willox 2017, 4). Trans studies takes these discussions further through its usage of ever-evolving approaches to existing debates.

Schilt and Lagos (2017, 425) argued that the history of trans studies in the social sciences could be split into two distinct paradigms: "a focus on gender deviance (1960s–1990s) and a focus on gender difference (1990s–present)." In the first paradigm, trans people became passive objects of study, with researchers taking a highly medicalising and pathologizing approach. The second paradigm was marked by a rise of notable trans academics, such as Sandy Stone (1992), Leslie Feinberg (1993), Susan Stryker (1994), Jack Halberstam (1998), and Julia Serano (2007). Here, trans people became active subjects of study, empowering them by viewing the community as "sociologically important in their own right" and prioritising the collection of qualitative data to examine lived experiences (Schilt and Lagos 2017, 426). The field's focus on the experiences of trans people attempts to undo the "long

history of academic objectification" that has been forced upon them (Bettcher and Garry 2009, 1).

Trans Joy

Despite these developments, the study of transness continues to focus on social, medical, and legal suffering. This often relies on the deviance paradigm, is done without the involvement of trans people in key researcher roles and is highly damaging to the community (Galupo 2017; Schilt and Lagos 2017; Shuster 2020; Jacobsen and Devor 2022; Melo 2023). Holloway (2023, 614) calls this approach the "tragic trans trope" and urges other researchers to move away from this damage-centred research approach to one focused on desire, joy, and wellbeing. He argues that the shift would assist in acknowledging the complexity of the group's members and would help the community more than the one-dimensional, harmful approach previously taken.

As of writing, there are relatively few published articles centring on trans joy, with only a few recent undergraduate and postgraduate theses, such as Davies (2022), James (2022), and Warwood (2024). One main paper, however, is Shuster and Westbrook's (2022) *Reducing the Joy Deficit in Sociology*, which focuses on responses to the question, "What do you find joyful about being trans?" Whilst the discussions emerging from this project intersect with Shuster and Westbrook's (2022) three categories (belonging to a marginalised group, connection, and improved quality of life), my study aims to add to this topic by exploring how joy is derived in complex and experiential depth. By exploring themes of language, embodiment and connectivity, I respond to Holloway's (2023) call for an increasingly multidimensional understanding of trans personhood, experience, and identity, and therefore resist the effects of academia's current epistemic foreclosure upon the trans community.

Methodology

A Note on Language

When I first started on this project, I ran into the issue of what to call the community I wanted to work with. With a desire to include the voices of those I would be representing, I turned to my local community's trans-specific Discord server and asked what language people would feel most comfortable with. There were a lot of different responses: "Non-cis," "trans and non-binary," "trans and/or non-binary," and "trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming" were all suggested and rejected during a two-hour conversation, which ended with no clear consensus on what I should call the subjects of this project. Eventually, I settled on "the trans community" for reasons similar to Stryker (2008, 23) in *Transgender History*: "they are short, easily pronounced, familiar words that can serve as a shorthand for a more complicated idea or identity or way of acting." This includes transgender and transsexual people, trans men and trans masculine people, trans women and trans feminine people, and non-binary and genderqueer people, amongst many others.

Readers should also be aware that trans studies is a rapidly evolving field (Shuster 2020, 2). Much of the language used in early trans works has now been problematised or dismissed entirely, and some terms or views expressed by my participants will be seen as problematic by others. With such a diverse community, this conflict is inevitable and significant; the contestation of terminology between different groups or generations is an important space for individuals to work out their sense of place, ownership, and sense of belonging within their communities. Therefore, where language that may appear strange or offensive has been used, it has been to maintain the integrity of the data, respect the participants who gave it, and ensure that their stories have been told accurately.

Autoethnography and Self-Reflexivity

Autoethnography and self-reflexivity were central to this project. It was important to me that if I was asking my participants to be vulnerable in sharing their experiences, I

needed to do the same. Whilst autoethnography is a contested method within anthropology, I agree with Jones and Adams (2016) when they argue that it is an inherently queer approach to data collection and participant relationships. Both autoethnographic authors aim to "refuse received notions of orthodox methodologies and focus" in favour of a more grounded, empowering, and politically active approach (Jones and Adams 2016, 197). This project draws upon Anderson's (2006, 375) "analytical autoethnography," wherein the ethnographer is a full, visible member of the research group and uses an "analytic research agenda" to improve "theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena."

I identify as a trans masculine, non-binary, queer person, and have done so for several years. At the time of writing, I was heavily immersed in my local LGBTQ+ community, and my status as an opportunistic, complete-member researcher deeply affected my work (Anderson 2006). Being known first as a community member helped my participants feel secure and confident when sharing the complexity of their experiences. Moreover, it helped me locate research participants, as I could access gatekeepers and the spaces they protect, which is often tricky for outsider researchers (Moore 2018). If I had not used my existing connections in the field, comparable access, trust, or disclosure would have been unlikely. I was also mindful of not assuming that I would share all my participants' trans experiences. For example, my relative social privilege means that I do not inherently have the same fears, experiences, or desires as others within the trans community, and assuming so would have been detrimental. As Anderson (2006, 386) states, "No ethnographic work—not even autoethnography—is a warrant to generalize from an 'N of one.'" Therefore, continuous self-reflexivity and co-production were essential to maintain positionality and manage power imbalances.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Interviews

After reviewing several interview models, I adopted a semi-structured, narrative-based

approach, as narrative and biography were central to my research aims. I moved from the typical timeline approach to an artefact-elicitation approach, as this gave space for the often non-linear nature of biographical narratives. I gave no criteria for this object, apart from it being something related to each participant's understanding of trans joy. By then opening the interview with curiosity into what the object was and why it was chosen, I was able to build more of a connection with my participants, therefore allowing us to co-produce unique data for difficult and abstract questions. Not all of my participants objects are discussed throughout this paper due to space constraints, but images have been included in an appendix to further humanise my participants and respect the stories and experiences they shared with me.

Participants

Due to time and resource constraints, I limited recruitment to my local community's trans-specific Discord server, which primarily hosts individuals from a town in the Southwest of England. I ended up with six participants and held both face-to-face and online interviews over two months (see Table 1); most of my participants were trans women or trans femme, and none, aside from myself, identified themselves as being trans men or trans masculine. Two have been removed due to consent conflicts.

As the trans community has previously been classified as an ethically vulnerable group to study, greater care is required during research to ensure their safety (Shaw et al. 2020). Therefore, although intersectional factors such as age, class, and race drastically affect experiences of trans identity, this data was not collected to minimise the risk of outing or forced disclosure. Interview recordings were kept only until I was able to create pseudonymised orthographic transcripts and were then destroyed. Identifying details about workplaces, residences, third parties, or participants' real names were changed, and participants were invited to choose their own pseudonyms, pronouns, and identity descriptions.

Participant	Pro-nouns	Gender Identity	Object
Roxanne	She/her	Trans Domme	High-heeled black boots (Figure 7)
Clara	She/her	Trans Woman	Workplace award (not photo-graphed).
A. A.	She/her	Goth Trans Woman	Black velvet choker (Figure 3), Cursed (feat. Wvlfpakt & Mecha Mai-ko) by Alex, Tokyo Rose, Wvlfpakt, and Mecha Maiko, and Skin of the Night by M83.
Naomi	She/her	Trans-sexual Woman	Pink cat mug (Figure 4), postcard (Figure 5) and letter (not pic-tured) from an online friend, Sylva-nian Family toy (Figure 6), keycard (Figure 7), and Discord pro-file picture (not pictured).
Re-searcher/ Author	They/ them	Non-binary, trans masculine, queer person	N/A



Figure 2 - A.A.'s object - a black velvet choker. Photo by Author 2024.



Figure 3 - One of Naomi's objects - a pink cat mug. Photo by Naomi 2024.



Figure 4 - One of Naomi's objects - a postcard from an online friend. Photo by Naomi 2024.



Figure 5 - One of Naomi's objects - a Sylvanian Family toy. Photo by Naomi 2024.



Figure 6 - One of Naomi's objects - a keycard. Photo by Naomi 2024.

The Joy of Relationships

T4T refers to “trans for trans,” an acronym initially used by trans people on Craigslist to advertise for queer-friendly or queer-only hookups (Awkward-Rich and Malatino 2022, 2). Over time, the term has moved away from its hookup-based origins to encompass a variety of inherently queer approaches to kinship and relationality, wherein individuals create dense

relational dynamics that prioritise support, compassion, community knowledge, and intimacy (Awkward-Rich and Malatino 2022; Holloway et al. 2023; DiCesare 2024). This is why some individuals may identify as T4T, instead of identifying as someone that prefers T4T relationships, as it can be something that permeates all areas of a person's relational map.

Whilst Naomi did not specifically say that she identifies as T4T, I resonated with many aspects of her perspective on the topic: "I didn't really understand what it meant to have something that I would describe as like, a same-sex relationship until I was with another trans woman, by which I mean there is a degree of sameness between us that I've never experienced in any of those relationships before."

As someone who does describe themselves as T4T, the term, for me, refers to my sexual partners, but also to my romantic partners, friends, and ways of approaching relationships. Whilst I am open to relationships with cis people, I prefer to cultivate relationships with other trans people, something shared by some of my participants. I do this as it helps me ensure that the people I become intertwined with have a similar life story to mine. This means that they understand the difficulties and joys of transness, as well as the emotional work involved, in a way that, I believe, cannot be understood in the same way by a cis person.

Emotional work can be defined as the "labour [which] one is required to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind to others..." especially in private settings, such as the home or intimate relationships (Hochschild 1983, 7). One example is the frequent, informal teaching and knowledge brokering requirement by disabled workers for non-disabled coworkers (Church et al. 2007, 10). Such education is done "informally (and invisibly) through daily encounters" such as casual conversations and is often brought about by a lack of understanding, leading to the fear of offending their disabled coworkers (Church et al. 2007, 10). This is something that Roxanne alluded to in her interview:

It's easier to empathise with another

trans fem, because they're making the same journey as I am. But I can also empathise with a trans masc, even though I personally do not understand the concept [of] why anyone would want to be a man [laughs]... I can empathise with the fact that you didn't feel right in your body, and that you are making the right decision for you.

Later in the interview, Roxanne discussed how she had initially struggled with empathy, almost slipping "down the pipeline of becoming a right-wing radical" due to her unhappiness with herself, as she looked at figures such as Joe Rogan and Jordan Patterson believing "they're successful, they know the answers." However, as she explored her identity more and became more comfortable with herself, she began to "learn empathy," especially for other members of the trans community. She realised that there was "something" about the figures which made her realise "no, that's not the path I can follow." I believe that part of this was due to the development of her trans social identity. As she grew more comfortable with herself, she was able to enter new community spaces and partake in conversations where the emotional work of knowledge brokering was less necessary, due to increased likelihood of shared experiences and lexicons. As neither participant was forced to educate the other, both had greater freedom to decide when, why, where, or how to disclose important information or knowledge, which allowed them to experience more of the joy of being themselves.

Church and colleague's (2007, 7) report on disabled bank workers also highlighted the emotional work involved in the "second job" of concealment. They describe this job as the process of social norms that require disabled employees to actively choose when to hide or not disclose certain aspects of their disability, to "facilitate their own integration... prevent negative reactions, [and] also to secure privacy against unwelcome curiosity" (Church et al. 2007, 7). It is through this lens that Naomi's quote, "I think ultimately trans people are the only people who can really fully see me," stands out. First, it raises the question of what it is that trans people are seeing that cis people cannot

see. Second, it asks whether this differing perception is because of active concealment or because of a lack of understanding. Why are trans, and not cis, people able to see this undefined quality?

One answer could be that Naomi has let other trans people physically see things that she would not feel comfortable with cis people seeing. Passing has been defined as “a trans person’s ability to be read by observers as cisgender” (Anderson et al. 2025, 45). It is a controversial concept and will be discussed in more detail below. However, for those who aim to pass, one commonly cited reason is the safety that comes with it. If Naomi allows someone to see her in a visibly trans state, such as when she said that she could be “unapologetically themselves” with her trans partner, she becomes even more vulnerable to transphobic attacks or discrimination. This focus on the body, and especially the harm that can come through its transness, was echoed in A.A.’s explanation of her choice of song, as it “feels like someone trying to reveal this hidden part of themselves. Literally just digging her nails into her chest to reveal this like, hidden part of herself, and that really appealed to me.” By letting her trans partner see these aspects of herself, Naomi is leaving herself vulnerable, potentially opening herself up to physical and emotional wounds. The trust that she places in her partner to keep her safe from harm fosters a deeper connection between both individuals, which, in turn, fosters joy.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the complexity that Clara’s point brings: “my protection is being very open about it. [...] I have to come out to you. And that is a risky proposition in a way that being like very, very open is not.” While some of my participants may hide their trans status, others, me included, attempted to pre-empt any potential risks by consistently outing themselves. As Clara says, “then if someone wants to say something transphobic, they have to say it to my face.” This lack of concealment provides a similar sense of security, but also requires a similar amount of emotional work. It is, therefore, understandable that Naomi, amongst others, would feel as if other trans people are the only ones who can “really fully

see [her],” as a T4T relationship lessens the risk of a partner demanding concealment or disclosure in such a way. This then allows joy to flourish in the relationship, as it enables participants to be fully seen and understood by those around them, leading to safe and supportive kinship networks.

The Joy of Monstrousness

Over my life, whilst I have experienced highly gendered, misogynistic violence, I have yet to experience transphobic violence. Because of this, some may call me lucky.

I know that I am a non-binary trans-masculine person, but I also know that I am rarely visibly trans; those seeing me in passing will likely categorise me as a lesbian or a female tomboy. Only people who know me well can read me correctly. This is often upsetting to me, especially when I am frequently misgendered or ignored. However, I am also aware that because of this, I can hide my trans status in situations when being open would be unsafe.

The reason I have been lucky enough not to be a victim of transphobic violence is because I am privileged enough not to be read as I truly am.

This lack of experience has also meant that I have not had to become familiar with common transphobic and homophobic slurs used against the members of my community who are read as trans. Therefore, many slurs have remained taboo for me. This is why I was uncomfortable when my participants used terms such as “sissy,” “faggot,” and “transsexual” to describe themselves. As soon as they said it, I felt ashamed and embarrassed. I immediately worried about how language that felt crass and hateful to me would be received by my majority cis audiences. It felt like they shouldn’t be reclaimed. (Author)

Before exploring the joy Naomi gains from the power of monstrousness, it is first necessary to acknowledge the depth of joy she finds in passing:

I would be lying if I said my experiences of trans joy is not related to passing in some ways. I feel much happier in myself and my transition when I pass.

For context, I don't even mean cis pass always. There have been times I've been clocked or outed myself, and yet people have still evidently been unable to really see me as male. [...] I also get a lot of joy from times like that—where I pass without having to hide some part of myself. In fact, that is when I am most happy with my experiences of transition. Fear of not passing was something I struggled with a lot when I was younger, and so I get a lot of self-confidence and pride in being able to give 'female,' you know?

During our interview, Naomi described herself as "the variety of transsexual that is insane about my body." This is cultivated by a Discord server she uses frequently, which encourages "hid[ing] the fact that you're transitioning until you can pass flawlessly." As Naomi points out, this is a difficult thing to do, especially when many medical transition policies have previously required an individual to be living as their preferred gender for a specified period in the UK (Barker and Wylie 2008, 124).

For better or worse, it is indisputable that the social groups Naomi was surrounded by in the early days of her transition have impacted what she prioritises and finds joy in. As she says, "I feel much happier in myself and my transition when I pass." However, in the middle of discussions regarding the importance of passing, Naomi still made a point to highlight how she does not inherently mean "cis pass." She wants to "give 'female'" but she also wants to be able to be open about her identity as a transsexual woman, something that is incredibly important to her: "I transitioned not because of some, like, abstracted thing about some internal essential gendered self, but because I wanted to fuck with my sex lol. I enjoy my sex being weird and different and female."

This quote easily encapsulates some of the questions held by Stryker's (1994) article, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*, wherein she discusses the parallels between the trans body and the body of Frankenstein's Monster. It is a profoundly evocative piece which examines how the "transsexual body is an unnatural body;" one

formed through technological intervention and the tearing and resewing of flesh into "a shape other than that in which it was born" (Stryker 1994, 238). She depicts a world of suffering and struggle, a world where trans bodies are seen as monstrous or inhuman for their ability to become something more "than the creatures our makers intended us to be" (Stryker 1994, 242).

One way trans people can purposefully recraft their bodies is with Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). HRT was initially created for cis patients to treat psychological and sexual disorders (Cammenga and Lubinsky 2022, 357–360). However, it has since become an important part of many trans people's transitions, becoming "an ontological necessity for a liveable life" for those who view it as a central part of their identity and transition (Fondén 2020, 29). All my participants directly referenced being on HRT and its positive connections with trans joy throughout our interactions. The social context of HRT, medical transition, and transphobia at time of writing is of vital importance here. Within the last few years, puberty blockers have been banned for trans children and young adults (Department of Health and Social Care 2024), the UK has drastically dropped on international rankings of LGBTI equality laws (Nathan 2025), and 96% of respondents to a UK wide survey of trans people said that transphobia in the media had impacted how strangers treated them (Sperring and Grassian 2026).

Multiple participants, including Naomi, highlighted the joy they found in the power of HRT to change and control their physical bodies. Common changes for my participants included physical changes, such as the creation of boobs (Clara), emotional changes (Naomi), and increased congruence between self-perception and external perception of the body (A.A).

Naomi states that she enjoys her sex being "weird and different and female," a compelling combination of words. For a transsexual woman like Naomi, who views passing as important, it would be reasonable to believe that she would take deep joy in her sex being 'female,' as it would indicate congruence between her body's sex and her internal

gender. However, as explored earlier, Naomi takes joy in being fully seen, residing in the tension between passing and living “without having to hide some part of myself.” She states that “there have been times I’ve been clocked or outed myself and yet people have still evidently been unable to really see me as male.” She seems to find great joy in the fact that her connection to the concept of “female” is so strong that cis outsiders cannot comprehend her as anything but, despite the artificial methods involved in its creation.

When saying she “wanted to fuck with [her] sex lol” as she “enjoys” it, her language indicates the strength of the joy she feels in this process of self-creation and pushing past the maker’s intentions. By achieving the “similitude of a natural body only through an unnatural process” and highlighting the “seams and sutures” that reside in all individuals, trans or cis, Naomi echoes Stryker (1994, 241) in finding pleasure in herself and her actions. She takes distinct pride in the monstrousness of her body as deemed by cis-normative societies, in its unseemly and unsightly aspects, in activities that would be considered unacceptable being pushed further into the realms of taboo simply by their “means of [their] embodiment” and methods of existing, something that has become even more pressing in recent years (Stryker 1994, 238).

She makes this even more apparent in her explanation of why she uses the term “transsexual,” instead of the more commonly used “transgender:”

I think there’s again a playfulness to it. I like when cis people recoil when I out myself: ‘I’m a transsexual, actually.’ They do not know how to handle that word. And I like when trans people who are unfamiliar with it tell me I cannot use it; that it’s bad politics or dated. Like, no, actually, it’s not some regressive thing, and you’re not going to police how I express my transness — I have been living this for a very long time lol.

There’s a kind of stubborn, resistant thing that I enjoy too, as I often feel so much pressure to be prim and proper and meek. ‘Transsexual’ rejects that. It

has shock value, it’s taboo, you know? To me, that feels very queer. Like, why are you so hung up on labels?

Also, like, I think it’s cunt lol. I just love how it sounds. I love that I can say it in ways that are powerful and cool, or coquettish and playful, or any number of things.

All of that stuff about transsexual also goes for the word ‘tranny.’ If I out myself to people I’m passing to, it will always be ‘I’m a transsexual’ or ‘I’m a tranny.’ Because I have so much confidence and control in those moments, it takes people aback, and makes me feel all sorts of good feelings lol.

In his paper, *Becoming Ever More Monstrous*, Nordmarken (2014, 39) uses Stryker’s (1994) parallels to provide a brutally honest recreation of how cis-normative society reacts to his “transsexual male-ish” body at different stages of his medical transition. He argues that whilst being monstrous is a kind of “definitional inferiorization” in its “terrifying otherness,” its ability to evoke terror in those he sees is “a certain kind of power,” a power he specifically claims and enjoys (Nordmarken 2014, 40).

It is this power that Naomi describes when talking about why she uses slurs and problematised language as identity descriptors. By employing language that others do not have the right to say, she publicly announces her place within a particular group, a belonging in which she takes great pride. When discussing *Frankenstein’s Monster*, Nordmarken (2014, 39–40) highlights that he “resists dehumanization” by providing himself and others with the language to make himself legible through “speaking about his experience of exclusion.” Through reclaiming these slurs and declaring her membership, Naomi creates a synergy between her linguistic practices and embodied realities, collapsing the often-upheld dualisms of body/mind and self/other.

Moreover, she finds joy in resisting categorisation from both societies surrounding her. In further discussion, Naomi explained her dislike of the term “transgender,” as she believes that, as the term is now widely

accepted, it carries with it a set of stereotypes that can be actively damaging to her and her community. By labelling herself as a “tranny” or “transsexual,” she resists any attempt by others, cis or trans alike, to dehumanise and forcibly homogenise her. This then allows her to retain both her womanhood and her personhood, proving to others that she is not inherently monstrous because of her transness; she is violently and viciously human, the same as anyone else.

This echoes Stryker’s (1994, 240) call to power, where she says that she aims to “lay claim to the dark power of [her] monstrous identity without it being used as a weapon [...] or being wounded by it [herself].” Naomi takes pleasure in how her language choices force people to “recoil,” not because they have been physically wounded, but because of her ability to make them confront their discomfort and reconcile with the effects of their words. She crafts a joyful mirror for the people surrounding her, not only to reveal the distress caused by the tensions of the gendered society around them but also to make others feel the burden of oppression typically felt by marginalised genders (Nordmarken 2014, 40).

As explored earlier, I am an example of how some members of the trans community are uncomfortable with the reclamation of slurs; some are uncomfortable due to historical usage against them, some are uncomfortable due to a lack thereof. However, the complexities and contradictions within Naomi’s story highlight the false nature of the homogenous stories told about trans people. By pushing singular narratives on trans identities and experiences, trans people are denied aspects of their humanity and are therefore denied autonomy over how others perceive them and how they perceive themselves.

The Joy of Embodiment

Clothes are important in how we express ourselves, and I feel [the choker (Figure 3)] communicates my vibes the best, and I also like it. And that’s what matters most. I don’t do it for anyone else but myself (A.A.).

Roxanne’s object, black leather high heels (Figure 2), is particularly pertinent in discussions of embodied performances of gender. In her discussion of why she brought along high heels as her object, she mentioned two contributing reasons: one was the sensory aspect of how the heels felt, “I love the way it wraps around my shin,” and the other was the feeling of correctness and confidence it brought her:

Previously, buying shoes was just horrendous. [...] I’d always find something wrong with them: they would always be uncomfortable, they would always be wrong. But the first time I put on heels, it’s like my body was built for [it] [laughs] [...] I think there’s some feeling of correctness there because it changes the way my feet are, changes



Figure 7 - Roxanne’s object - a pair of high-heeled black boots. Photo by Roxanne 2024.

the way I stand, and then I can... I stand with more confidence, and I come across more confident. [...] And that’s probably where the feeling of power comes from.

She believed that this confidence was because of the physical changes the heels make upon her body, something which has been supported

by literature (Gurney et al. 2017). However, I believe that it also linked the joy that comes from gendered embodiment.

In modern UK culture, the high heel has become a widely understood and replicated symbol of femininity (Dilley et al. 2015; Wright 2020). To see someone read as masculine wearing high heels is to see a rather obvious break from the traditional gendered norms. Whether or not she agrees with this cultural norm, this appears to be a belief that Roxanne has internalised. Whenever we discussed wearing heels, she referred to them within the context of womanhood and femininity, with both of us laughing at the idea of me, a trans masculine person, wearing heels and other feminine clothing later in the interview.

Therefore, when putting on her heels, Roxanne is also putting on the associated gendered norms that come with them. She steps out into the world in her heels, just as she steps out into the world as a feminine-coded body. In this act, we can see Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological framework of the "body-subject," or body-self, coming into play. This refers to the idea that one cannot understand the self without understanding how the body is perceived by others, how it itself perceives, and vice versa. Put simply, in this moment, "the body and mind are indistinguishable" (Mascia-Lees 2016, 154). In Roxanne's example, she feels how the heels change her stance, which increases her confidence. She also, either consciously or unconsciously, recognises how she has now become more feminine in others' perception of her, therefore leading to more physical changes. The body reinforces the mind, and the mind reinforces the body, leading to both internal and external gender affirmation and joy (Migdalek 2021, 723).

This also echoes A.A.'s argument that "You can express less with your naked body than you can with what you adorn that naked body with." As discussed previously, the level of vulnerability that comes with being naked in front of another person is often unsafe for many trans people. Whilst for some, it may be empowering and euphoric, for others, it can cause dysphoria or disclose their status as a trans person, something that may put them at

risk. Therefore, the use of adornments, such as jewellery, clothing, or makeup, can be both a preventative safety tool and a way to reinforce their performance of their gender identity, for themselves and others.

The argument of gender as performance, found in Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble*, is one that revolutionised gender and queer studies. In essence, Butler argues that gender comes from a set of acts that everyone performs in accordance with the sociocultural expectations of the gender assigned to them because of their sex. These acts are embodied; they centre around the body, how it holds itself, and how it interacts with other bodies in the space. A.A. echoes Butler's (1988, 521) infamous quote, "one does one's body," when A.A. states that "gender is something you do. Like it is a performance, and as you keep doing it, you feel more comfortable with certain aspects of it."

Clara discusses this sense of affirmation through performed acts of embodied gender in her example of Ethan offering to carry her bag:

When I'm out with Ethan or with other trans men, something that will often happen is they'll be like, 'Oh, can I take your bag for you?' and I often let them just because... Even though that form of chivalry is really stupid, and I would never say that a woman is weak, the fact that they are offering means something to me. I guess I found a certain kind of affirmation from the trans community that's really instinctive and reflexive and valuable.

She refers to the expectation that women are weaker than men and that a man physically shows care through the act of offering to take a heavy bag. This is reminiscent of the example explored by Migdalek (2021) wherein he and a cis female friend experimented with how gender is embodied and performed in the act of a female resting a hand on their "male partner's proffered arm" (728). When they tried reversing the norms, with him placing his hand on her proffered arm, he writes that they both found the reversed position "decidedly uncomfortable and awkward," something he attributes to social conditioning and the lack of examples in Western media (Migdalek 2021,

728). They have not performed the roles enough times to become comfortable in them; they are still learning their lines. There is clearly an embodied aspect to the norms at play. Whilst we disagree with them, both Clara and I are performing learned gender norms wherein men are seen as stronger and supportive, whilst women are weaker and receptive. These are then physically played out by the apparent display of weakness from the woman (being unable to carry the bag) and a countering display of strength from the man (being able and willing to carry the bag).

Clara decries these gendered norms as “really stupid,” forcefully stating that she would “never say that a woman is weak.” Nonetheless, the embodied performance of gender still plays out: Ethan offers to take her bag, and she lets him. To justify this dissonance, she states that “the fact that they are offering means something to me.” She appreciates the “instinctive and reflexive and valuable” affirmation of her gender that it brings, despite its arguably misogynistic origins. This is reminiscent of past surveys in which trans women have reported objectifying experiences, such as catcalling, to be a form of gender affirmation, as “they are objectified in ways that mirror the sexual harassment of non-transgender women” (Sevelius 2013, 677).

It may appear contradictory: a trans woman who has rejected many of the social norms surrounding gender, relying on gendered norms to affirm her identity. However, as Van Wolputte (2004, 263) argues, the body-self is “fragmentary, often incoherent and inconsistent, precisely because it arises from contradictory and paradoxical experiences, social tensions, and conflicts.” This is not exclusive to trans identities. The process of continual self-refinement and contradiction is one that every individual takes part in, but it is often only discussed in relation to marginalised groups, especially trans people. Clara’s trans identity does not mean she has discarded every social norm that has left an imprint on her body-self; in fact, they have likely become hyper-significant.

Moore (1994, 2) provides a partial explanation for this, as she describes how, through the process of identification,

individuals create differences between groups. To belong to a group, one must first create the group; it must be differentiated from the other groups that threaten to absorb it. This embodied act of gender performance is joyfully affirming for Clara, just as it is reflexively affirming for Ethan; both reject the lines originally assigned to them in favour of new, more appropriate lines and, in the process, reinforce the boundaries between them. This joy is the other side of the same joy that was explored earlier; whereas Naomi found joy through her explicit rejection of sexed norms, Clara found joy in the implicit acceptance of some gendered norms.

The explicit relationship between joy and their gendered interactions was overwhelmingly clear in my participants’ answers to the question of what they found joyful outside of being trans. All participants struggled to find an answer to this question that was unrelated to their transness. Some gave examples of distinctly non-trans-related hobbies, such as watching the Eurovision Song Contest or playing Warhammer 40,000. However, they still then linked them to transness in some form: Clara linked Eurovision to Dana International, the only trans woman to win the competition, and Roxanne said she finally settled on the Iron Warriors, her main Warhammer 40,000 faction, as she felt them to be “extremely trans egg coded.” Egg referring to a popular meme in online trans spaces that refers to trans people who do not know they are trans, or who are aware but are in denial (Lavery 2020).

Naomi made it even clearer when she said:

I'm finally able to think five years ahead. That's new to me. I'm having exciting new experiences that are positive. All of them are related to me being trans [laugh]. And, you know, you say, ‘What brings you joy other than that?’ I've just been in survival mode for so long that I couldn't even answer that. [...] But the things that do bring me joy at the moment are related to having that increased stability, I suppose. And inevitably, that comes back to me being trans in some way.

If, as Mascia-Lees (2016) claims, there is no separation between the mind and the body, then it is understandable that people who have had to fight through a great deal of resistance to align their cognitive gender and the body's perceived gender could begin to think through a highly gendered lens. This would not be the same implicit gendered lens that permeates most of society, but a more explicitly gendered and self-critical lens, one wherein every movement, every piece of clothing, and every sound made could drastically change others' perceptions, potentially leading to unsafe situations.

This is the lens of embodied transness. As they do not have the privilege of their gender being taken for granted, trans people cannot simply perform their gender; they must perform their transness as well. Their gender did not come innately with their sex; it was crafted through a period of intense self-reflection and analysis, and so every performed act of gender is intentional. Trans individuals can often then only leave 'survival mode' and free up their emotional energy when they are performing correctly. By leaving survival mode, my participants can explore themselves more fully, allowing them to find things that then bring them joy outside of their transness. However, paradoxically, as they only found this 'increased stability' because of their transness, an unbreakable link is made between their now correct performance and any joy that comes thereafter. This lens is vital to trans people's experiences of joy and identity. However, it is not something that has been much explored in previous literature. The damage-centred focus that has been so dominant until now has prevented this multi-faceted and contradictory understanding of the self from being explored, something that must be countered by future research.

Conclusion

This research project has responded to the calls for moving away from damage-based frameworks, instead approaching the lives of marginalised groups as the complex realities they are. I aim to counter the epistemic foreclosure currently affecting the trans

community and to lessen its harmful impact by providing alternate narratives for what life as a trans person can include. It has specifically looked at the lives of trans people in the UK, and how their identities can influence experiences of joy and contribute to the multifaceted complexity of human nature.

Recommendations for Future Research

As has been discussed, the ethnographic study of trans joy is a new and quickly developing field. While this project directly responds to this gap in the literature, it was limited in participant group size, participant diversity, and location. Future research should focus on specific age groups, races and ethnicities, or different locations, to name a few factors. There is also a need for literature that explores cis people's understandings and explorations of gendered joy, as well as literature that examines how trans individuals experience joy at different stages of their transition.

Trans research should not be singular in its approach. Although the trans community is small in comparison to other marginalised groups, the full complexity and diversity of trans experiences must be explored to understand what this community means and how it contributes. As this field grows and as the epistemic foreclosure that prioritises the tragic trans trope relaxes its grip on trans academia, the narratives told about trans people should become representative of their authentic lived experiences and can become something that serves and supports the community. If these narratives do not change, we must begin to "consider the long-term repercussions of *thinking of ourselves as broken*" (Tuck 2009, 409, original emphasis).

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Dark Humor and ‘Brainrot’: The Hidden Power of Gen Z Laughter and Collective Identity Making

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ABSTRACT

‘Brainrot’ is a relatively new concept within fields such as anthropology, cognitive science, and psychology. It is generally defined as low-effort social media content associated with a range of negative consequences, including shortened attention spans and increased anxiety. However, this article proposes an alternative understanding of brainrot rooted in its capacity to help Generation Z navigate and resist societal expectations, producing more generative and positive outcomes. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with seven Generation Z (Gen Z) participants—undergraduate students at UC San Diego—this paper demonstrates how brainrot operates as a genre of dark humor through which Gen Z expresses a shared, collective political identity. Although brainrot is often framed as detrimental to young people’s cognitive and social development, I argue that brainrot humor shares key qualities with surrealism, linking it historically and aesthetically to traditions of dark humor. In doing so, it reveals an emancipatory political potential. Through this lens, more broadly, this article proposes brainrot as a communicative practice that offers insight into how Gen Z constructs identity, builds community, and develops coping mechanisms in response to contemporary social pressures.

Keywords: Brainrot, dark humor, Gen Z, collective identity, political expression, California, USA

This article explores how Gen Z's consumption and production of brainrot humor functions as a response to the sociopolitical pressures placed on them as the generation expected to "fix" society's many challenges. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with undergraduate college students, in which participants react to dark humor brainrot Instagram reels, I examine the defining qualities and characteristics of this form of humor. For example, brainrot media employs "deliberate absurdity and surreal AI-generated aesthetics" (Götzfried and Heitmayer 2026, 1) which I expand on below.

I argue that brainrot is a distinct comedic mode within Gen Z culture, which can be divided into two primary forms: "classic" brainrot and dark humor brainrot, both of which are explored in this study. Furthermore, dark humor and brainrot play a vital role in how Gen Z cultivates social cohesion, helping to "form a sense of community by making light of shared experiences through the expression of a generational identity" (Aronson and Jaffal 2020, 527). Brainrot is often understood as "the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging" (Yousef et al. 2025, 1). However, this article contends that it serves a more meaningful function: for Gen Z, brainrot operates not only as a creative coping mechanism, but also a communicative practice that forms solidarity and acts as a tool for political expression. First, I define what makes a generation and trace the generational differences in dark humor throughout recent decades, revealing a Gen Z specific humor.

Dark Humor through Generations

Generation Z (also known as Gen Z or Zoomers) is generally defined as the age group born between 1997 and 2012. However, the category of "generation" is made up of more complex relationships, feelings of belonging, and identity than simply being born within a certain period. Specifically, as anthropologist Corrine Laporte at the University of Ottawa claims, being a part of a generation is subjective and involves self-identifying with trends associated with the group (Laporte 2021, 7). Laporte cites the collective symbolization of rock music and counterculture for example, to generally represent those who came of age in the 1960s despite only a portion of this generation participating in these trends (Laporte 2021, 100). Similarly, while most of my interlocutors resonated with brainrot trends, they found the reels they watched funny or at least understood them. One interlocutor found himself confused by many of the Instagram reels and did not resonate with the humor. I want to note my interlocutor's reaction to illustrate that like in any generation, there are differences in interpretations of humor and perceptions of cultural events.

Therefore, while any generation cannot be generalized completely, the height of millennial trends, for example, was massively shaped by the rise of the internet and a specific humor and meme culture marked by excessive self-deprecation and irony recognized today by many Gen Z as outdated and "cringe" (Cheong 2023). Gen Z trends, on the other hand, were created during the peak of short-form media creation through platforms like Vine, Musical.ly which became TikTok, and eventually Instagram and YouTube which now also feature short-form videos. This form of media consumption has arguably led to the rise of brainrot. In her research on millennials, Laporte (2021) notes how generational conflict may also be necessary to form generational belonging. For example, she finds that part of the identity of millennials is to contest the 'Boomer imposed narrative' of millennials as entitled and lazy Laporte (2021, 8). This conflict, as I expand on later, is also reflected in Gen Z's identity and approach to humor and online practices.

Researchers of 'dark humor' across different generations have shown how brainrot responds to collective existential threats and social and political crises (Powell 2022, 195)--from U.S. Prisoners of War during the Vietnam War to Millennials during the Covid-19 pandemic. Researcher Linda Henman studied the behavior of American POWs in the Vietnam War who survived years of imprisonment. Soldiers' ability to find humor, especially in the darkest depths of captivity, was crucial to their survival, as it offered a way to take back control and gave them hope to live another day (Henman 2008). These soldiers displayed what Sigmund Freud famously wrote about as 'gallows humor,' which protects the self from the expenditure of painful feelings and offers comfort or pleasure (Freud 1905). Yet in these cases, dark or gallows humor has more effects than just the individual. The ability to laugh together exemplifies and strengthens social bonds which were crucial to the survival of the POWs.

Shifting contexts, millennial digital humor has been described by scholars as dark, absurd, and weird. Millennial meme culture openly and critically joked about existential threats stemming from structural policies such as wage stagnation and job market instability (Powell 2022, 202). Millennials have faced deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, creating an entire generation with increased job instability, costs of living, and financial insecurity, earning them the name "the unluckiest generation" (Van Dam, 2020). Yet millennials were quick to turn to the internet as a site to produce humorous content on their collective challenges. Scholars noticed this especially during the COVID-19 Pandemic, which produced a distinct style of dark humor online, including "witty posts that took reflective aim at emotional eating, isolation and alcohol consumption, temporal disorientation, and existential crisis" (Powell 2022, 203). In a similar gesture of self-preservation as US POWs, millennials used dark humor to not only take back control, but this humor also became part of forging a collective identity online.

Like those previous generations, Gen Z has also faced a multitude of social and existential crises—including feeling responsible for saving the planet from climate change ('climate anxiety'), exposure to gun violence, soaring

economic inequality, and social isolation. One of my interviewees, 21-year-old Noémie from Paris, France, told me, "From a young age we've all been told this discourse 'Oh we're gonna be the ones to save planet earth' and there's a big weight that's put on our generation." Like previous generations, Gen Z extensively utilizes dark humor to respond to these compounding social, political, and environmental crises. And like previous generations, it forges a collective identity through this humor that is partly developed in opposition to previous generations.

But the quality and makeup of Gen Z dark humor, particularly online, is different from both Millennial meme culture and other genres of dark humor. A study of a Facebook group of emerging adults during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed "the existence of generational humor that is unique to this age group," in both its style and deployment (Aronson and Jaffal 2021, 527). The authors found that Gen Z dark humor draws on sarcasm, popular culture references, and specific childhood imagery that "both reproduce[s] and create[s] shared generational experiences and social space in opposition to older generations" (Aronson and Jaffal 2021, 526). While other generations have also used sarcasm, what makes Gen Z dark humor distinctive is how it combines sarcasm with references to pop culture, making "many of the memes incomprehensible to older generations" (Aronson and Jaffal 2021, 527). For example, one interlocutor tells me that when she thinks of the humor of older people, they tend to have a drier sense of humor that often contains a witty critique. And while Gen Z does the same critiquing, it is through "random craziness" that "other generations wouldn't have appreciated because its not clever."

As I argue below, within Gen Z, brainrot is a unique genre of dark humor that is a departure from past generation's uses of the comedic style. Having been defined as "a genre of deliberately low-effort, absurd short-form videos," brainrot has been established as a cultural phenomenon with unique user practices (Götzfried and Heitmayer 2026). For example, in addition to specific nostalgic imagery and sarcasm, brainrot often employs low-quality AI-generated content. And while not

all low-quality content/brainrot is AI-generated and vice versa (Götzfried and Heitmayer 2026, 1), there is certainly overlap between the two that can speak to the more negative nature of brainrot media creation and consumption. Although not all brainrot is produced by AI, AI-generated imagery, aesthetics, and language is often used in brainrot media further compounding an already perplexing form of humor for older generations.

I argue that the illegibility of Gen Z humor is intentional and a symptom of “intergenerational group consciousness” which I expand on in a later section on brainrot and Gen Z identity. This term has been used by scholars Morgan Anderson and Gabriel Keehn to describe the “consciousness building movement” of memes like the ‘OK Boomer’ meme which can help younger generations “build solidarity in the face of their collective marginalization” (Anderson and Keehn 2020, 57).

Anderson and Keehn analyze the ‘OK Boomer meme’ as a “nascent expression of sociopolitical critique,” particularly against “the deepening structural inequalities that present unprecedented challenges for our nation’s youth” (Anderson and Keehn 2020, 57). The idea of keeping out older generations is key to Gen Z humor and by extension, Gen Z collective identity (see Figures 1 and 2).

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and formula for ‘practice’ can help explain this complex phenomenon. Bourdieu’s habitus aims to explain why certain individuals and groups of people act in predictable patterns despite being “free agents” (Maton 2008). Habitus “captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not



Figure 1 - Digital image screenshot from Instagram reel of an ‘Ok Boomer’ meme. The image itself illustrates the collective feelings of younger generations about the future. The caption posted along with this image (not shown) simply says “ok boomer.” The meme subverts the imposed expectations surrounding cost of living that the Boomer generation (1946–1964) may impose on younger generations. The joke displays how Gen Z will inherit the degraded socioeconomic/social conditions that Millennials have inherited from Boomers (@littleshitjoe 2025).

ONE DAY



i love that being able to afford rent n groceries is being romanticized by gen z like we've literally reached an economic point of no return

Figure 2 - Digital image screenshot from Instagram reel of a meme conveying a similar sentiment about the collective dread the younger generation has about traditionally expected life achievements like moving out and living alone. It exhibits contemporary socioeconomic issues and the reality of affordable housing, something that used to be an expected but is now something many youths see as out of reach or a romanticized “dream.” (@itsallaboutmemesss 2025)

others” (Maton 2008, 52). In addition to habitus, social capital describes one’s position in a social field. These three dynamic relational components (habitus, capital, field) work together to underpin complex human decisions and practices.

However, the structures of habitus also evolve over time. For example, when analyzing Gen Z, the disposition of this group is of course incredibly varied, but the common denominator is their collective experiences within a social field (as Gen Z). For example, Noémie’s story illustrates an existing tension many Gen Z experience while entering adulthood in which they feel responsible for fixing the existential issues plaguing our society.

As Noémie expressed, the popular notion that Gen Z will “save the world” creates an immense burden on Gen Z. Personally, I have heard this exact phrase or versions of it many times whether from professors, well-meaning older individuals, or even content creators on social media platforms. While this rhetoric seems positive and “feel good,” it places significant pressure on members of Gen Z, creating more feelings of anxiety. This overly optimistic outlook of how Gen Z will change the world is not shared by my interlocutors, myself, or other Gen Z youth highlighted by staff writer for Utblick Magazine in an article titled “Why Gen Z Is Not Going to Save the World.” As Gen Z author Lena-Sophia Steinert claims, Gen Z has been labeled as “digital natives” having been the first generation to grow up alongside the internet supposedly creating ultra-aware, politically conscious activists (Steinert 2024). On the other end of the spectrum, Gen Z also commonly face accusations from older generations of being selfish, too attached to technology, and overall unaware or out of touch from reality. An article from The Atlantic “Getting Gen Z Primed to Save the World” showcases this exact polarizing dichotomy as it contends with the popular myth that the next generation is “entitled, distracted, and apathetic” as it claims: “today’s much-doubted young will be as engaged with the issues of the day as any generation before them—and may be even better at making positive change” (The Atlantic 2015).

The result of this misguided labeling is multi fold as “Gen Z has been burdened with the failures of its predecessors and is expected to live up to all of these expectations without crumbling under the crushing weight of a dying world” (Steinert 2024). In addition, these stereotypical conceptions of Gen Z distract from structural issues by displacing responsibility onto this group, maintaining and justifying other generation’s lack of accountability, and are overall reductionist and destructive (despite one having a more “positive” view of Gen Z).

Gen Z has developed in a technologically advanced era in which much of their social expression occurs on and through the internet. The internet can be a space where a different kind of social capital circulates, an online ‘clout’ which may take precedence over traditional understandings of social capital. The combination of a specific generational lived experience as well as seemingly deteriorating social conditions and somewhat equal access to the internet makes it so that brainrot is especially potent in manifesting in the day-to-day behavior and practices of Gen Z. This is what many of my interlocutors refer to as an “unserious” attitude, a phrase many Gen Z use in a distinct conceptualization of casual day-to-day brainrot which I examine more below.

Researcher of new media Wendy Chun examines the intimate relationship between technology, communication, and habit in her book *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. She writes, “New media... are endlessly fascinating yet boring, addictive yet revolting, banal yet revolutionary” (Chun 2016, ix). Chun describes new media as being defined by continuous updates yet inevitable obsolescence, the blurring of boundaries like publicity and privacy or hype and reality, and its habitual mechanism which intertwines and naturalizes new media in our lives (Chun 2016). When the “new” has become the “habitual,” media has the most power to influence and structure our lives without us knowing and ultimately, “through habits users become their machines” (Chun 2016, 1). Brainrot humor can demonstrate how many of these boundaries, between offline and online worlds, can blur and how brainrot humor has become habitual as part of Gen Z media consumption.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative, ethnographic interview approach to examine how members of Generation Z interpret and engage with brainrot on social media. The participants in this study consisted of seven undergraduate students at the University of California, San Diego. Participants were selected to reflect a range of academic disciplines and social identities in order to capture diverse viewpoints. Data collection took place between March and May 2025. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview around 45 minutes to an hour in which they were shown five Instagram Reels that I had preselected and categorized as examples of dark humor. These reels included content addressing topics such as social justice, economic inequality, and cultural grievances — subjects that are often politically charged and potentially uncomfortable. I want to note that not all instances of dark humor are perceived as equally “dark,” among my interlocutors. Perceptions of what constitutes “darkness” in humor are culturally based, shaped by varying social norms and histories.

During the interviews, I used an open-ended questioning format, asking participants about their reactions to the reels and what thoughts or feelings were provoked. This was to get a better idea of what aspects of dark humor and brainrot stood out to my interlocutors and how it relates to the pervasiveness of this phenomenon. Follow-up questions further examined their interpretations of the humor, their familiarity with similar content, and their broader relationship with “brainrot” media and dark humor online. In addition to reactions to specific reels, participants were asked to reflect more broadly on the relationship between humor and politics, including whether humor can meaningfully engage with serious or sensitive topics. This line of questioning was informed by Rebecca Krefting’s concept of “charged humor,” (Krefting, 2014) defined as humor that engages with politically and emotionally loaded subject matter. Drawing on this framework, I define dark humor as humor that makes light of highly politicized and emotionally potent issues. This project was deemed exempt from Institutional Review

Board (IRB) approval because it was conducted as part of a course requirement.

Results

‘Brainrot’

‘Brainrot’ has various meanings but has mostly been described — and dismissed — by most academics and internet observers as mind-numbing. Another popular use of the term, for example, is a derogatory one as a critique of others’ excessive online usage. Some Gen Z share this negative view as well. One undergraduate student at Tufts University wrote an op-ed about how extensive usage of brainrot terms leads to an erosion of “our ability to maintain intelligent conversations and formality when necessary” (Huang 2024).

Current scholarly literature on “brainrot” is similarly focused on its harmful effects, including on youth cognitive abilities, increased anxiety and depression, and overall health decline. In fact, the term has become pathologized. Research by pediatric physicians on the physical, emotional, and cognitive symptoms and treatment plans for the effects of brainrot shows how short-form media consumption can lead to cognitive overload, diminished academic performance, decreased memory and attention, as well as an increase in superficial information processing (Aysi et al. 2025). Beyond the cognitive effects of brainrot, philosopher Jakub Marek argues that ‘doomscrolling’ (the main mechanism through which brainrot is produced or achieved) also affects the psyche. For more context, from 2020 and onwards the term “doomscrolling” has adopted a slightly different meaning as opposed to its meaning as used most around 2020/the Covid-19 Pandemic era to mean obsessively scrolling through social media looking for the most recent catastrophe/disaster (PenelopePenguin 2020). The most recent definition has shifted to describe the feeling of being unable to stop scrolling on social media (X-Pseudonym 2023). Using Kierkegaard’s existential analysis of distraction and impatience, Marek argues that doomscrolling produces a “specific temporality and corporality,” in which one is disoriented

and dispersed with no possibility of turning towards, or finding, oneself (Marek 2023, 131).

While I do not deny the validity of these views of brainrot, in this paper, I shift the focus to consider brainrot as a complex and unique form of dark humor and specific phenomenological response to the challenges and threats faced by Gen Z. I argue that in addition to what has been said about it, brainrot is also a creative and expressive byproduct of generational conflict. Brainrot offers Gen Z a unified generational experience in which to express and channel feelings of absurdity, build solidarity, and find social support. Further, previous scholarly analyses have not closely examined brainrot's aesthetic sensibilities and qualities, which I show tie back to a longer history of surrealist techniques in dark humor.

My Gen Z interlocutors alerted me to the importance of brainrot as a subgenre of humor when they used the terms 'brainrot' and 'brainrot humor' to refer to both a style of humor and a phenomenological orientation they experience while consuming it. One interlocutor makes the distinction that, unlike other genres of dark humor, brainrot does not seem to require wit or cleverness. Instead, brainrot primarily works through "shock, absurdity, randomness, and non-sense." Generally, the more removed from real life and surreal the content, the more "brainrot" it is. This humor is self-aware in its apparent lack of meaning. Rather, it finds its power in how easily it can be consumed and the feelings it tends to produce. Not all 'brainrot' has 'dark humor' elements--that has a social or political edge to it. One interlocutor said, "You can brainrot to anything, to be honest." His words imply that the content one engages with is not nearly as important as the act of "brainrotting" itself. However, I argue that even 'classic' brainrot shares something in common with classic forms of dark humor, namely the reliance on surrealism. In the following section, I identify two kinds of brainrot: "classic" brainrot and dark humor brainrot and reflect on their expressive qualities for Gen Z. While "brainrot" humor originates online, particularly in meme culture, it also exceeds the social media landscape and filters into Gen Z' everyday life,

even while it maintains connections with technology. While it's no secret that social media influences Gen Z, this phenomenon doesn't seem to be as simple as jumping on the bandwagon or social influencing. Brainrot shows potential to be more than just another silly trend on the internet. It is also a powerful political tool that is intertwined with the sociopolitical concerns and aspirations of the Gen Z social world.

In non-digital environments, brainrot commonly manifests in using brainrot terms such as "cooked" or "aura" in daily conversations or in settings outside of where social media discourse exists, amplifying the humorous and boundary blurring power of brainrot. Merriam-Webster defines "cooked" as a term describing "someone or something in a state of possibly irreversible misfortune and hardship" and "aura" as the vibe given off by someone especially "in reference to exhibiting prowess" (Merriam-Webster 2025). One interlocutor, Andrew, told me he enjoys saying brainrot terms specifically when it is out of context: "I'll be like, what the sigma? And, like I have a Greek alphabet on my phone, so I'll put the actual sigma." He demonstrates how brainrot content is not only something he enjoys interacting with in the sphere of online social media, but how it is entangled and naturalized in his private life off social media as well. Andrew also tells me how the intentional inappropriateness of invoking brainrot terms comes naturally to him. His words illustrate how brainrot blurs reality and surreality as Gen Z further intertwines its language and aesthetics into their offline world, a central aspect of brainrot which I expand on in the section below. Moreover, beyond just saying brainrot terms or references to brainrot humor, brainrot may also manifest as something greater—an ongoing state of mind for Gen Z.

My first indication that there is something specific about Gen Z "brainrot" humor when compared to other kinds of dark humor that utilize shock and absurdity emerged during my interview with my interlocutor Brian, a Hispanic first-generation neurobiology student. He shared a personal anecdote with me about his friends:

This is a bit of an anecdote--sorry for the tangent—but, the other weekend my friends went to New York, and they got into a really bad car accident. One of them had a mild concussion and thankfully they were all safe, but the first thing they did outside of that was film a [funny] TikTok. This generation is so unserious and quick to turn these moments [into something else]. I don't know if it's a coping mechanism, or something our generation, our community, has... been trained to do. But I think [Gen Z humor] is different in being able to so quickly turn such a scary or serious moment into humor.

Brian's story about his friends immediately filming a TikTok after getting into a car accident exhibits how brainrot is not only a type of humor, but a state of mind. His claim that Gen Z is "so unserious" suggests brainrot as not simply a form of humor used to cope with stressors, but a larger philosophy or way of life that transforms serious or stressful situations into something ridiculous. While the word "unserious" can imply not fully grasping the full severity of certain situations and being ignorant of when to be "serious," I believe this "unserious" philosophy to be a practice that Gen Z has evolved to adapt to their social landscape. According to Brian, brainrot is useful in uncertain times as people "are quick to laugh at how ridiculous it might be."

"Classic" brainrot

One of my interlocutors described "classic" brainrot as "endless scrolling" done alone, during which you are bombarded by "flashing bright colors, things that don't make sense, and funny audios." Her description illustrates some essential characteristics of brainrot humor, including overstimulating visual components. By "funny audios," she was referring to short audio clips often borrowed from pop culture and transformed into their own trend through being integrated with memes. Qualities of classic brainrot include utilizing distorted voices or images and illogical sentences or made-up terms designed to be both ironic and utterly overstimulate the user who sees it. "Classic"

brainrot content also includes specific terms/phrases (Skibidi, rizz, aura farming, what the sigma), using certain emojis (laughing crying emoji, skull emoji, fire emoji), and specific songs that already exist or new ones made especially for the brainrot genre (you can find playlists of brainrot music on music streaming platforms like Spotify). Nearly anything can be turned into brainrot as long as it's used meta-ironically, a term also used to describe brainrot and produces a feeling of mental degradation and detachment from real life. The term meta-irony has been used casually across the internet to describe Gen Z humor more broadly and specifically when examining how Gen Z interacts with brainrot content. Essentially, meta-irony is all about blurring the line between joke and sincerity. The punchline is the ambiguity created by, for example, saying "That was so skibidi rizz" and the confusion about whether it was said ironically or with sincerity. Saying brainrot terms in real life is not supposed to be sincere, but because Gen Z adopted these terms into day-to-day conversation, they soon became part of many Gen Z's colloquial language and used both ironically and sincerely. Again, we see how ambiguity and crossing boundaries is a central component to brainrot and Gen Z humor.

After reacting to the pre-selected dark humor reels, third-year neurobiology student



Figure 3 - Digital image of the character "Ballerina Cappuccina" (@aironic.fun 2025).

Paige describes some of them as brainrot or having brainrot qualities. She says brainrot is “laughing at something that isn’t really anything, it’s just stimulus on a screen.” She continues, “It’s random, absurd, and so shocking that you just laugh. Like, it’s so stupid, and you know it’s stupid.” She then bursts out “Ballerina Cappuccino!” To which we both laughed aloud, illustrating her point about how brainrot operates. Ballerina Cappuccino is a reference to the AI generated Italian brainrot memes currently trending on social media (see Figure 3). These AI generated memes combine humans or animals with random objects which are then given Italian or Italian-sounding names and are often accompanied by an AI voice over of an Italian man saying the ridiculous names of the creatures. Some of these characters include Ballerina Cappuccino who is a ballerina with the head of a cappuccino and Tralalero Tralala who is a shark with three legs wearing sneakers (see Figure 4).



Figure 4 - Digital image of the character “Tralalero Tralala” (@eZburger401 2025).

When Paige and I let out an uncontrollable flurry of laughs at “Ballerina Cappuccino,” we illustrated an important aspect of classic brainrot: that it is designed to make you feel distant and detached from real life. Paige’s reference to Ballerina Cappuccino in our conversation temporarily blurred the lines between the online world and the “real world.” The idea of bringing something so silly into

something more serious like an interview caused automatic laughter. In fact, the very idea of conducting academic research about brainrot caused most of my interlocutors to laugh.

Interestingly, my interlocutors had differing views of the effects of the mental and emotional detachment enabled by brainrot humor. Some reinforced what the public health research says about brainrot, while others highlighted brainrot’s other potentials. Paige, for example, described the feeling of mental degradation from viewing this kind of content: “There comes a limit where if everything I’m watching is brainrot, then it’s not surprising anymore and I’m just desensitized to it.” She acknowledged that brainrot is not boundless in its effects on users. However, another interlocutor revealed how this “desensitization” of brainrot can be a coping mechanism to relieve stress. Andrew, a first-year mechanical engineering student said brainrot is “the best humor when I’ve been studying for ten hours straight...I think it’s really stupid humor, but it’s also the stupidity of it that makes it funny.” “Classic” brainrot is nonsensical and absurd. These memes are meant to be “cringe” (A.K.A. embarrassing to watch/hear). In fact, the purpose of “classic” brainrot memes is to be so bad and shocking that they subvert all expectations of what makes a meme funny, which in turn, often draws out a laugh or two out of the user.

Brainrot and Surrealism

On the surface, brainrot may seem useless and just plain “stupid.” However, several conversations with my interlocutors contained mentions of detachment from reality and a feeling of “life is unreal” when watching both “classic” brainrot and dark humor brainrot. Along with my discussion with Paige about brainrot’s ability to cross boundaries, I began to see connections between brainrot and surrealism. Furthermore, some of the aesthetic features of brainrot, particularly its use of surrealist techniques demonstrates how brainrot is connected to a longer history of dark humor.

The French writer and founder of Surrealism in the 20th century, André Breton, defined surrealism as pure psychic automatism or expression with “the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (Breton 1924, 87). For Breton, surrealism was a necessary antidote to the “reign of logic” inaugurated by industrial modernity. This system requires absolute rationalism and “under the pretense of civilization and progress,” dismisses “any kind of search for truth” that does not align with widely accepted practice (Breton 1924, 88). The history of Surrealism, beginning in the interwar era in France, reveals the movement’s potential for political agitation which was rooted in the idea of the revolution for a society that would be built for the “psychological needs and desires of mankind rather than imposed by the dictates of utility, logic, and mindless economic determination” (Short 1966, 25). Along with other major artists, writers and thinkers in the surrealist movement—such as Man Ray, Salvador Dali, and René Magritte—Breton believed the key to unlocking the answers to human experience was through the unconscious, particularly the coexistence of dream and reality. For him, returning to childhood was a major pillar of surrealism, as childhood is usually the last time one could be immersed in a dream-like state, free from the rationalizations and restrictions upholding society.

The Surrealists believed that their approach could help liberate our imaginations, freely express the unconscious minds, and eventually bring a new society into being (Short 1966, 5). For some time, the movement aligned itself with the French Communist Party, but tensions between the artistic and political forces within the movement led to their separation after 1935. With writings that utilized “satire and insult,” Surrealists sought to “arouse the feeling of revolt” and spark a spiritual revolution based on the inner most desires of humanity (Short 1966, 14). As a form of humor, “classic” brainrot exemplifies many of the surreal, dreamy, and childlike qualities described by Breton (see Figure 5).

However, I argue that it is dark humor brainrot and not classic brainrot that



Figure 5 - Digital image screen shot from an Instagram reel exemplifying a “classic” brainrot example. A minion from the popular children’s movie *Despicable Me* is photoshopped with rap artist Kanye West’s face. The minion is traveling toward the audience on a boat while audios reminiscent of pre-school music play in the background. Additionally, the background is made up of a dreamy lake scene with a large moon reflecting in the water and white birds flying in the sky. Altogether, this reel contains elements of childhood imagery and absurd, dreamlike qualities. This post at the time of me capturing this image had 1.3 million likes (@brainrotcentralized 2024)

exemplifies the closest connection to Surrealism because of its political potential. “Dark humor brainrot” uses the style of “classic” brainrot characteristics, but it does so to engage in a critique of the hard, cold political reality that currently imbues contemporary US society, from Gen Z’s perspective. The meme as a mode of communication deserves attention as well as it is suitable for the “task of emotional mobilization, both activating the individual experiences of those who experience injustice and also tying them to larger-scale political goals and ideals” (Anderson and Keehn 2020, 60).

Taken together, Surrealism's emphasis on psychic automatism and its use of humor to provoke revolt underscore its orientation toward both imaginative and political liberation. Although "classic" brainrot displays a manifestation of the movement's aesthetic qualities, dark humor brainrot more closely aligns with its revolutionary aims, using absurdity not only to disrupt existing structures but to engage critically with contemporary issues.

Dark humor brainrot

Dark humor brainrot offers the most direct aesthetic, historical, and political link to the surrealist dark humor of the past. An example of dark humor brainrot is a meme that shows a young man swirling a glass of blue Powerade with the overlaying caption "how to deliver bad news" as the camera zooms in on the swirling drink (see Figure 6). It then transitions to a clip of a dolphin jumping out of the water along with the young man who is posed like a dolphin. The caption now says "im getting deported." The 2017 song "Symphony" by Clean Bandit plays in the background producing conflicting emotions of amusement and nostalgia as well as discomfort and shock. Suddenly, instead of being "just" another brainrot meme evoking wonder and play, the viewer is forced to confront the reality of deportation and the underlying idea the imagery suggests: deportation goes beyond simply physically removing someone from where they are living. It also removes that person from the reality they know and understand. Like the young man in the reel, someone may feel they are thrust into an absurd world of nonsense outside the "real world."

This example highlights multiple surrealist qualities of brainrot, such as the use of symbols harkening back to childhood, such as the innocent and dreamy image of a dolphin leaping over a bright blue ocean as the sun sets in the background and a big rainbow fills the sky. The young man is photoshopped into the clip and is a bit distorted as a jarringly happy pop song from 2017 (around when Gen Z would be in middle school) plays in the background, juxtaposing the darkness of the video's



Figure 6 - Digital image screen shot from an Instagram Reel. Source: (@oleki_vfx 2025)

message with the rainbow, candy colored image.

This reel shows how brainrot dark humor can confront a difficult subject and package it into something digestible. Like Breton and the Surrealists' call to use the fullness of our imaginations, the meme transforms our idea of deportation itself, shifting away from a victim narrative to the idea of deportation as a portal to another dimension. In this way, brainrot dark humor asks us to consider "the disparity between appearance and reality in the civic sphere until we realize, finally, that things aren't quite as they seem" (Butler 2023, 61).

The juxtaposition of the utter silliness and absurdity of the visuals/song against the terrifying caption works to short-circuit any rationalizations or logic. This hyper-real representation undermines established social and political structures by drawing attention to the absurdity of policies like mass deportation

or expedited removal which have been brought to the forefront of American politics by the second Trump administration. Furthermore, the silliness and imagery of this video also question the demonized image of immigrants as dangerous criminals. As Nick Butler, the author of *The Trouble with Jokes: Humour and Offensiveness in Contemporary Culture and Politics* writes, "Jokes invite us to play with language and meaning, and they remind us that the way we make sense of the world around us is just one of a number of possibilities" (Butler 2023, 53). Dark humor brainrot creates the space for reimagining a different way of thinking and understanding the violence being imposed on immigrants. This example thus changes the narrative while dispelling harmful stereotypes that have been given fuel in the public domain. This kind of humor "...challenge the myths we sustain about how fair and democratic our society is and the behaviors and practices we enact every day to maintain that fiction" (Krefting 2014, 2).



Figure 7 - Digital image of a screenshot from an Instagram reel showing a young well-dressed man standing in the foreground while what appear to be missiles fall in the background. The caption claims the man is 'aura farming' which suggests that the man is collecting social capital by standing nonchalantly for a picture while a war scene is ongoing behind him (@fruitsnacks 2025).

Most of my interlocutors also recognized that brainrot dark humor could work in the

opposite way, such as when the joke excessively trivializes a highly sensitive matter or 'punches down.' This is an important reminder that not all dark humor is necessarily politically progressive or liberatory. As Rebecca Krefting puts it, "all humor locates itself in social and political contexts, but not all humor does so self-consciously or with specific intentions to promote unity and equality" (Krefting 2014, 2). My interlocutors also described some dark humor brainrot as fatiguing, desensitizing, and as potentially harmful to understanding important social or political topics (See Figure 5).

For example, Tim, a fourth-year human biology student, highlighted the potentially negative effects of dark humor brainrot, such as quick and repeated exposure to dark material (see Figures 7, 8, and 9), ultimately causing people to adopt an attitude of "all this is a joke, and I can say whatever I want." Tim's apprehension reflects Butler's argument about the sinister side of dark humor: "In the not-serious world of jokes, anything is permitted and everything is fair game, and this is what makes humor so seductive and insidious" (Butler 2023, 1). Basically, no matter how bad or offensive, the nature of humor allows one to get away with it by invoking the words: "it's just a joke."

While this more disturbing side of brainrot dark humor certainly exists, it still has significant implications beyond individual effects. For example, brainrot dark humor can act as an instrument to measure and gauge the health of the "individual sovereignty that lies at the heart of Western democracies" (Butler 2023, 53). While Butler argues for a greater awareness of how humor can be weaponized, he also recognizes that it can be used for good. Historically, nation states that have deprived their citizens of the ability to protest by criminalizing humor or criticizing the government have not had the healthiest democracies. Nick Butler reminds us that: "as long as we keep smiling, as long as we don't take ourselves too seriously, we can avoid the worst excesses of fascism" (Butler 2023, 58). Freedom of expression, and in this case political humor, goes hand in hand with political freedom, and dark humor brainrot is no exception. In this way, I believe dark humor



Figure 8 - Digital image of a screenshot from an Instagram reel depicting George Floyd's face photoshopped onto a Labubu. Labubu is the most recent internet trend causing widespread frenzy and mass purchases. Like the image, the caption combines George Floyd and the Labubu together in an absurd and horrifying comment on what many across the internet have expressed as disgust and irritation at social media users' compulsive consumption of whatever the internet deems trendy. Using George Floyd's likeness also seems to be drawing a connection between the mass movements online and in real life that occurred after his death and the most recent Labubu craze. The words "Coming soon" with the fire emoji also seems to be signaling to the idea that this is the future: nothing, even a figure like George Floyd, is safe from the hyper commodification and obsession with consumerism that plagues our society. While no one can be sure of the creator's true intentions, this meme ultimately seems to be expressing disdain and aversion to the idea that some sectors of the public jump onto trends (even social movements like Back Lives Matter) simply for the sake of appearing trendy (@humanity.gone73 2025)

brainrot is also part of Gen Z's contribution to upholding civic accountability and protecting the health of the United States' democracy as the country's youth ensure we continue to comment on, laugh, and destabilize the political status quo.

Brainrot is used "not only to keep informed and to contact others, but also to feel in certain ways" (Lupinacci 2021, 285) which my interlocutors illustrated as they highlighted the feeling of intimate connection with friends and a Gen Z community through brainrotting. Historian Kirsten Leng recognizes how comedy produces affective and psychological effects: "it

can relieve tension, provide comfort, offer catharsis, articulate anger, connect us viscerally (and virtually)" (Leng 2022, 20). Leng notes that these affective responses are "arguably heightened in moments of crisis" (Leng 2022, 20). Leng cautions against labeling all comedy during crisis as a form of escapism as late-night shows for example, "in the early months of the pandemic...did not aim to distract us from the virus; rather, they reflected our sur-reality back to us, or shared our rage and helplessness, or highlighted the new insights and cultural developments brought in the virus's wake" (Leng 2022, 26). I believe dark humor brainrot functions similarly. Its purpose is not to distract from intense political violence and suffering but rather meets the absurdity of



Figure 9 - Digital image of a screenshot from an Instagram reel showing a person cosplaying as Mario in Mario Kart with the caption "hell nah even Mario pulling up to the LA riots." The original reel also included a sideshow of other people cosplaying as fictional characters like Goku and Batman with similar captions for each character. This meme suggests that the riots have reached the point to where even fictional characters are showing up in support (rapup 2025).

these very real and upsetting issues with even more absurdity. With this imaginative remaking of people's everyday political realities, it may create more openings for understanding and change.

Brainrot and Gen Z identity

As other theorists of humor have also argued about different genres of humor, brainrot too produces a sense of communion, collectivity, and belonging for those who participate in it. Humor is just as much about the joke as it is who you're laughing with: "A joke isn't meant to be processed inwardly, in our heads; its meant to be expressed outwardly, directed towards others in search of laughter" (Butler 2023, 2). Brainrot establishes collective identity and creates belonging for "insiders" while simultaneously othering and producing conflict with "outsiders" as "...social identities are fundamental to social interaction in that they provide points of orientation to 'alter' or categorize 'other' as a social object" (Snow and Corrigan-Brown, 2015, 174). Brainrot and its manifestations in real life can be understood as a symbol, and in particular, as a direct index (Hill 1998) of Gen Z identity which signals to others membership within this group as well as traits associated with this group such as open mindedness and nonconformity. Conversely, it can also be an indirect index of a non-Gen Z identity and traits such as conservatism and intolerance. One interlocutor tells me, "[Brainrot] makes me more connected to my friends...we can all collectively laugh at it."

Brainrot in all its variations is an important way Gen Z communicate with one another, signal belonging, and build community, in the sense of a 'we' that is "derived from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Stekelenburg 2013, 1). Traditionally, the concept of collective identity has been formed within the study of social movements and refers to a 'we' "emerging from shared concepts, convictions and emotions of people actively engaged in implementing social and political changes" (Chodak 2016, 278). While brainrot is not necessarily a social movement, there are components of brainrot, namely its affective and aesthetic qualities, that tell us

about the possible shape of social movements that might derive from or use it.

According to Melucci (1989), cited by Stekelenburg (2013), collective identity "must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated by repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals to groups" (Stekelenburg 2013, 2). Through memes online and references in real life, brainrot acts as a mode of activation that repeatedly connects individual users to participation in public, collective actions (Shifman 2014). Additionally, according to Castells (1997), the emergence of collective identities "appear to be associated with conditions of sociocultural change or challenge, socioeconomic and political exclusion, and political breakdown and renewal" (Snow and Corrigan-Brown 2015, 176) which reflect the conditions to which dark humor brainrot is bringing attention to.

Social analysts of humor have long noted how humor both produces collectivities and draws boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Brainrot and other forms of dark humor are no exception. A common theme among interviewees was recognizing how Gen Z humor is simultaneously less legible to those who are not part of this generation. In other words, there are those who are "in" on the joke, and those who are not. This concept is illustrated by Brian who describes brainrot as requiring "a group of people to agree that this thing that shouldn't be funny is funny."

During my interview with Brian, he revealed his excitement for this interview as he "thought it would be fun" to discuss dark humor memes. One of the reels I had selected to show was of a white-passing restaurant owner claiming he would defend his employees from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers while performing various silly fight poses in front of a line of his employees. The text in the video reads: "me 12 margaritas deep protecting my small-town Mexican restaurant employees when ICE shows up," as the 1999 song "Livin la Vida Loca" plays in the background. I had expected Brian to react negatively to this reel, because the main subject of the video was the white restaurant owner, not the restaurant workers who I thought Brian might identify

with. But contrary to my expectations, Brian found this reel the funniest out of the five he watched. He explained how conversations about deportations had become “a very real and present threat” in his family. Some of his immediate family members were dealing with their own precarious immigration status. With “how scary” the current political climate can be, Brian felt it was precisely his personal connection with the reel’s themes—the fact that it was making light of a topic that is spoken about within his family—that allowed him to laugh. According to Brian, his “connection to that heritage, that culture,” made this video funnier to him.

While for me deportation was not something I was comfortable joking about, as I do not have the lived experience, Brian, as an insider, could see the humor in the video because jokes and conversations about deportation and ICE already exist in his social world. Brian’s ability to laugh did not mean he did not take the fear of deportation seriously. Rather, Brian revealed a common aspect of dark humor consistent throughout my interviews, which is an insider vs. outsider dynamic, in which one’s location relative to a certain marginalized group dictates that person’s degree of moral authority as well as how that person receives humor. The more ‘inside,’ the more moral authority one has over whether a joke is funny. Relatedly, those on the ‘outside’ feel less authority in deeming the joke funny. That is to say, the lived experience of those in marginalized groups grants them a certain jurisdiction to which “outsiders” do not have access.

Scholars have long noted how humor creates connections between people (insiders) while also drawing boundaries, excluding those who don’t get the joke or cannot laugh (outsiders). In fact, drawing on social psychologist Michael Billig’s theories on humor, far-right politics researcher Eva Svatoňová notes how “the production and reception of humor are essentially dependent on not only the producer of the joke and the audience, but also on the specific culture and social group to which they belong” (Svatoňová 2023, 241). Humor therefore has the power to create emotionally potent feelings of belonging and familiarity, which conversely also means humor has the

power to “other” and further alienate those who do not belong. As Svatoňová puts, “Those who laugh together, belong together” (Svatoňová 2023, 247).

Brian also described brainrot humor as a “large inside joke” that is funny on the condition that there is a collective agreement that it is funny. He stated that brainrot is “more accessible and easier to spread” with friends and other Gen Z because the humor itself is so “low effort” and easy to understand. On the other hand, another interlocutor, Lauren, described brainrot as being less accessible, as there is a “specific type of culture around it” that requires a certain understanding specific to Gen Z. Harkening back to Anderson and Keehn’s use of “intergenerational group consciousness,” their comments on the legibility and accessibility of brainrot reveals how humor, and particularly brainrot humor, can define Gen Z identity itself as being “in” on the joke is a characteristic of being an insider of the group. Like all generational identities, Gen Z identity is shifting and mutable. However, Gen Z have also been described as seeking “authenticity, edginess, and nonconformity in their self-presentation” which makes dark humor especially appealing to this group. ‘Brainrot’ humor can help “establish a distinct self-image that sets them apart from traditional norms and expectations” (Jacob 2023, 219).

As I previously discussed, generational conflict is a defining feature of Gen Z humor as well as Gen Z identity. Brainrot becomes a space in which “clashes between Gen Z dark humor and the sensibilities of older generations” are played out, reinforcing “Gen Z’s self-image as boundary-pushers and rebels...confronting generational differences through their humor expressions” (Jacob 2023, 220). These clashes have as much to do with the medium of expression as they do with the fact that dark humor brainrot “critique[s] and satirize[s]” social structures of power resulting in further alienating older generations who “may perceive it as disrespectful or undermining societal values” (Jacob 2023, 221). At the same time, this consciousness building is a “necessary precondition to political action” (Anderson and Keehn 2020, 57) and

further illustrates how brainrot could be understood in a social movement context.

Conclusion

In his 1905 book *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud examines how jokes are used as a tool to “temporarily pause social prohibitions” and transgress the restrictions society imposes on the id (Butler 2023, 19). Freud defined the part of the human psyche known as the “id” as unconscious instinctual desires which find relief through humor which acts as a socially acceptable outlet. I have argued that for many Gen Z consumers, brainrot humor becomes a way people can truly unleash their innermost desires—in short, the “id.” When concerning these base human desires, things can quickly get dark. But oftentimes, darkness is necessary to see the light. Sometimes, dark humor can be just what an audience needs. Of course, dark humor is not always liberatory and can be oppressive and undermine social justice. But depending on what the joker’s message is, humor can subtly shift how we view the world one joke at a time.

In my time working on this project, which started in the spring of 2025, there have been numerous sociopolitical upheavals which have been reflected in memes across social media. From Donald Trump retaking the White House to mass deportations across the country, to U.S and Israeli air strikes on Iran, Gen Z’s precarity has been on full display. I, alongside my fellow Gen Z-ers, am witnessing in real time how our generation has responded to the possibility of the United States entering a war with Iran and the overwhelming sentiment is reflected in reels I began seeing as soon as news lines came out. This reel (see Figure 10) which is time stamped on June 17th shows a fake clip of hundreds of missiles shooting off into space and coming back down to earth. Then a clip from the 2013 movie *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* plays in which the entire city of London, identified by the iconic Big Ben, is bombarded and destroyed in flames. The caption ‘Trump when it’s my turn to be an adult’ overlays the video as the 1980 parody song “Bomb Iran” by Vince Vance & the Valiants plays which Trump ironically used in his



Figure 10 - Digital image of a screenshot from an Instagram reel showing the city of London being bombed with the caption “Trump when it’s my turn to be an adult” (@hypocrisyhammer 2025).

own post on Truth Social amid the ceasefire which took place June 24th.

Jokes ultimately help us be able to say what we normally wouldn’t be able to, which is incredibly useful when it comes to talking about the worst things happening to the people we love and cherish, our communities and country, and humanity as a whole. While brainrot can look like pure id and just more nonsense on the internet, this view denies the insight brainrot is offering into how many youth understand, process, and communicate about what is happening around them. This shapes their collective identity not only through online networks, but also through human-to-human interactions.

Brainrot could also be considered another tool in what the Surrealists deemed a spiritual and political revolution: “humour is a currency of revolt, exchanged freely between those over whom power is unjustly exercised and spent lavishly at moments of political crisis” (Butler, 60). Indeed, moments of political crisis often produce surges of critique and satirical commentary. It is in this current stage of American politics and seemingly disastrous conditions for our future generations that it is more vital than ever to highlight how brainrot is being utilized by Gen Z as a form of sociopolitical expression, and how it creates new understandings of our world and how we can thrive in it together.

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Resilience, Working-Class Poor, and Death: The Complexities of Being A “Strong Young Woman”

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnography explores the relationships between the working class, resilience, health, and mortality in the United States. It combines personal experiences with empirical research to paint a picture of working-class American struggles within the individual and family context over time. By detailing the author’s personal experiences with growing up in a working-class family and coping with a close family death at a young age, the article highlights what numerical data in other research fails to capture. Statistics alone do not encompass the daily hassles, struggles, and traumas that working-class poor people encounter. Being a member of the working class plays a strong role in an individual’s health and their access to healthcare and shapes their experiences with death and grief. Through discussing the various ways American healthcare and government systems are failing the working-class poor, this autoethnography calls for more community advocacy and change to these systems so that quality healthcare is accessible for all.

Keywords: Resilience, health, working class, United States, autoethnography

I have always been reminded how strong I am. I hear from friends and family around me, "You are such a strong young woman," and "I wish I was as resilient as you." These may sound like compliments, but to me they're a bit of a double-edged sword. I do agree that I am strong, and I appreciate those who recognize it, but my strength grew simply because I had no other choice. I didn't want to be strong, and I shouldn't have had to be strong, especially as a child. Growing up as a young woman of working-class poor status, I have faced my fair share of adversity.

As a child, my family was on food stamps, but as I got older, we no longer qualified because my dad made too much money according to the government. We still lived paycheck to paycheck and struggled to keep food in the house. There were times when the fridge was mostly bare except for condiments, water, and sometimes juice. Meals often consisted of different variations of red meat and cheese. Fresh fruit and vegetables were out of the question, as we couldn't afford them, or they would spoil before we could eat them. There were some occasions when we had fresh produce, but it wasn't often. I remember the excitement of hearing that mom was making chicken, carrots and potatoes in a crockpot. It was usually a special occasion when she made it for dinner. I felt like a rich person eating like that. I got lunch at school for free, but I was a very picky eater, so I mostly ate packed lunches. They were usually peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, soup, or tuna sandwiches with a side of chips and a Hostess dessert. The government's income threshold for those who qualify for food assistance did not, and still does not, match reality. Our household income was above the poverty line, disqualifying us from many government assistance programs,

and we still struggled relentlessly. My mom stopped working when I was in early high school due to her disability and began collecting Social Security checks. These checks were around \$700 or so a month, which was never a livable amount for a family of four even with my dad's income added. I never knew how much he made, and I'm not sure my mom did either. He seemed to keep quiet about that stuff. He handled all the finances and would give my mom a budget every week for what she could spend. He rarely did any shopping because he was always working, and he would be furious if my mom spent too much money. As a child, I often got my clothes from the Salvation Army. I never wanted to admit to it out of fear of being teased. At the time, it was not considered cool or trendy, but a sign of being poor.

My friends, who lived in beautiful white picket fence houses with finished basements and white crusty-eyed dogs, had moms who didn't want me to come play with their kids. There were many times when I asked if I could go to their house and play, and was told by their mothers, "maybe another day." I would hear about all the fun playdates and parties they would have that I was not invited to. I went a couple of times and remember feeling like it was the best day ever. I never asked why I wasn't invited, assuming it was something I did or said that made them not want to hang out with me. There was a noticeable divide in our friend group. I had a couple of friends who lived a street over from me in the trailer park, and I was always much closer to them than my other friends who lived in the nice neighborhoods across the main road. I remember my parents never really getting along well with the rich kids' parents. Sometimes I was told I was not allowed to hang out with them because my parents were not talking to their parents. I was never sure why until my parents broke the truth to me one day. They told me that they didn't like us because we were poor. What? Why would that matter? It was incredibly confusing to try to wrap my mind around as a child. It was something I had to come to terms with, whether I understood it or not, because it was not an issue that was going away any time soon. But what was I to do except be strong?

They treated being poor like it was a plague. Like if I came into their house, they would be

infected by it. It created insecurity in me that I had not previously had. I started to become more aware of the financial divide between myself and others. Getting older, everything started making sense as I learned more about social inequality and what it meant to be considered a “working-class poor” household. I saw this pattern of disgust and fear from the middle and upper class repeated as I got older. I had several boyfriends over the course of high school and into my freshman year of college whose families had more money than mine. My first boyfriend lived in a beautiful big house. He and his family lived very comfortably and had well-paying jobs. I always felt out of place when I went to their house. They were never outright rude, but their actions spoke louder than words. One night, I had gotten into a bad argument with my dad and needed to leave the house for a little bit. Just an hour or two to cool down. It was maybe 7 p.m., and I asked if I could come over to his house. His parents said it was too late at night for that. It was summertime, so there was no worry about having to be up early for school. It felt like they always had a reason why they did not want me over. They never seemed very interested in what was going on with my life. Whenever I tried to vent my frustrations and struggles, they always just seemed disengaged and distant. Almost like they did not want to hear it. It was easier for them to live in their bubble. That boyfriend and I were not together for very long. In high school, I began to give disclaimers to the friends I brought into my home. I would say, “I am just warning you now, my house is gross. It’s old and in bad condition. It’s not clean. My dad is probably sleeping on the couch too. I’m honestly embarrassed of it; I’m sorry.” If it was not the toilet broken, it was the oven, or the dishwasher, or all of the above. It was always awkward explaining my situation, especially as I got older and life became more complicated at home. However, as I aged, many friends that I brought home were understanding of my situation, and I think that is because I began surrounding myself with people who were understanding and empathetic. Despite this, insecurity about my social class and home grew stronger as my understanding of class grew. The embarrassment still resides deep within me. I feel that no matter how much money I

have, what home I live in, or how much I scrub counters and vacuum carpets, it will never be enough. No amount of money will make me feel secure. No number of hours spent cleaning will feel clean enough. The scars of financial insecurity may fade with time, but they are a part of who I am now and who I will become.

Background

Income, Health, and Mortality

Low-income groups face more barriers and struggle more than their middle- or upper-income counterparts. These can include physical and mental challenges that stem from their economic status. They more often engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking and poor diet as well. Longitudinal research has found that low-income people have an over 10-year decrease in life expectancy. Although healthy behaviors in low-income groups can help to reduce this difference, they cannot erase it (Liu et al. 2024). Research has also found that the relationship between health and income is not a linear one. When looking at health data across various income levels, increases in income in lower-income groups more drastically improve health than in higher-income groups (Lleras-Muney et al. 2025).

In this article, I reflect on my experiences with growing up in the working-class poor. By sharing my struggles, I want to shine a light on the experiences of the poor, who often go unseen. From poor health habits, to unhealthy work conditions, to unobtainable and unaffordable healthcare, resiliency is built at the expense of quality of life and lifespan.

American Healthcare Systems and Costs

Despite healthcare being a fundamental need, people who struggle with food and housing insecurity face competing needs and will prioritize their food and shelter over healthcare costs (Kushel et. al. 2005). Kushel and colleagues (2005) found that 23.6% of respondents struggled with housing instability, and 42.7% struggled with food insecurity. People who struggle with food and housing insecurity will likely have a harder time accessing healthcare and are more likely to

have emergency room visits and hospitalizations (Kushel et. al. 2005). Of homeowners, 30% have reported housing instability. It is an even higher rate with renters, with over 50% reporting housing precarity (Burgard, Seefeldt & Zelner 2012). Self-rated health outcomes were found to be worse among participants who have reported a history of homelessness, those who struggle to keep up with rent/mortgage, and those in foreclosure (Burgard, Seefeldt & Zelner 2012). Higher incidence and prevalence of cardiometabolic health issues like hypertension and self-reported cardiovascular diseases were also found among people struggling with housing instability (Gu, Faulkner, & Thorndike 2023). Another study found that people who had healthcare through government assistance had worse or no change in health status. This could mean that these programs are not giving enough to low-income groups, leading to worse health than those with private insurance (Zieff et. al. 2020).

Financial instability and poor health can be an embarrassing experience for many. There are some people, though, who can successfully persevere in these situations. These people are considered to be resilient. They pride themselves on being able to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” It is comforting to know that not everyone who is poor or sick is doomed to misery, but it can also set dangerous expectations for how working-class people view their status.

Resilience

Secombe (2002) discusses the concept of resiliency in poor people, how it has previously been researched, and how it should change public policy. People who are considered resilient can live happy lives and bounce back from financial hardships and traumas they have experienced. Due to the overwhelmingly negative consequences associated with being poor, less is understood about these resilient individuals. Research has found that children who were able to overcome these negative outcomes in adulthood had close family relationships high in warmth and support as well as strong community ties. These individual factors that influence resilience are important

to understand, but there is a glaring issue: income inequality is a societal issue, not an individual issue. With income inequality increasing, there is only so much an individual can do to better their circumstances, especially when government programs are not providing enough support for people to escape financial hardship long-term.

There is a lack of literature discussing working-class people and the negative side effects that come with the expectation of building resilience. However, Anderson (2019) discusses how African American families are expected to build resilience against adversity while the systemic root of these adversities is left unaddressed. Anderson’s study of over 400 African American children who experienced significant childhood stressors as well as exhibited strong resiliency were found to have high allostatic load in later life. It was theorized that these young adults would be more prone to chronic illness despite their best efforts to remain resilient. Therefore, expecting people to be resilient against adversity while neglecting advocacy work to change the systems creating these adversities is setting people up for failure. Although further research is necessary to better understand this relationship in working-class populations, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the same argument could be applied.

This idea of resilience in poor people, paired with a broken healthcare system, creates a perfect storm to keep the poor, poor. The strong individualistic culture in America tells people that they should work hard and can achieve their goals by doing so. Working hard is important, but what happens when tragedy strikes and health declines, preventing one from working? What happens when medical debt piles up and one still cannot return to work to even attempt to pay off those bills? How can someone possibly be resilient when our culture prioritizes hard work over health?

Methodology

I signed up for a sociology class about social inequality in my sophomore year as a psychology major at Wayne State University, which brought me on a long journey of self-reflection. We had to do several writings about

different aspects of social inequality and relate them to personal experiences, as well as observations about the experiences happening around us. When the topic of socioeconomic inequality came up, a topic I feel deeply passionate about, I began typing furiously. When it came time to share, I wanted to be the first. I wanted everyone to know about the horrible inequality that existed and affected people around them, even to some who sat next to them. I wanted to expose the real-life ramifications that social policy is having on the working-class poor.

Midterms rolled around, and it was time to choose our favorite prompt to further develop and support with empirical literature. I worked on it for hours and produced a piece of writing that I was most proud of up to that date. You can imagine my surprise when the paper came back as a C-. I was furious. How could something so deeply personal, after hours of work, be worth a C-? I met with my professor, and she explained my grade and gave me tips on how to improve the paper for the final, then suggested I pursue publishing. I saw the opportunity and ran with it. But the class ended, and as time passed, struggle persisted and the responsibilities of being a young adult compounded quickly. I felt my spark was burning out. I never let it go out completely, though. No matter how long it took or how many tears were shed, I knew I would finish this paper. I was going to tell my story, and I know that it will resonate with many who have faced similar struggles.

An autoethnography is a body of work that focuses on the author's life experiences and, through reflection, ties these experiences to culture, politics, and society (Poulos 2021). Méndez (2013) discusses how autoethnography can be used as a self-reflexive method to better understand your own experiences and therefore be more empathetic and understanding of others, creating a more well-rounded researcher. This method examines personal experience in a vulnerable way while recognizing the broader context that influences those experiences. It allows for rich data. It could be argued that its conclusions are limited due to data analysis stemming from personal narrative. However, this limitation does not

consider that people are connected to the world by culture, which influences experience, and therefore allows for more nuanced and culturally specific conclusions to be made.

This paper was important to me for several reasons outside of talking about my adverse experiences and my father. Writing forced me to look inward at my experiences and how they have changed my perceptions, behaviors, and growth. It also made me examine more deeply the social policies America has in place, the beliefs and stigmas many of us hold, and it made me want to share those reflections with others. It was easy for me to explain all that had happened. The hardest part, however, was thinking deeply about why this was so important and why I felt compelled to write about it. Also, if it was so important to me, why did I keep procrastinating? Why did I put this project on hold so many times? Where was that resilience that has driven me for so long? I think my fear of failing held me back often. If I had put all this time and effort into writing and it went nowhere, it would be for nothing. I also did not like having to admit how stacked my odds were as a young woman born in a working-class poor family, the negative and long-lasting effects of being financially unstable, and how I began to notice some of the things I hated about my father in myself, something that will be discussed in depth later in this paper. The more I wrote, the more I noticed how my mind becomes loud in silence. I felt irritable and burnt out through a period of having school and work 7 days a week. Seeing the bags developing under my eyes when I looked in the mirror made me wonder if I was doomed to the same sad fate as my father.

Life With and Without My Father

The Night Shift

My father worked night shifts for most of my life. There were short periods here and there where he would try a new job during the day, but it either did not pay well enough, or he did not like it. Between 2017 and the summer of 2023, my dad worked around 80 hours a week, every week, strictly night shifts. There were even periods of time when he would work around 100 hours a week. It was rare that he

ever had a day off, and if he did, it was because he specifically requested it off for important events like my graduation. These were far and few between, though, with his boss denying many requests. Even before those years, his life revolved around working. I remember as a child even having a birthday party at his work. At the time, my mom worked for Tim Hortons and my dad worked at Wendy's, which were connected in one building. That fast-food birthday party seemed normal to me at the time, but looking back now, I realize that it was not. Through high school, I remember spending lots of evenings behind the counter of my dad's gas station job. I have many memories of the cold lights and smells of gasoline. I often dreaded visiting my dad. Half of the time that I would visit, we would argue about something. I remember sitting on a milk crate (because he wasn't allowed to have a chair) behind the register, arguing with him. We would have to stop whenever a customer came up to the counter. He would flip a switch like it was nothing, greeting customers with a smile and asking them about their week. My father did not have any friends, but he knew his "regulars" very well. Sometimes they would even give him gifts. He prided himself on how well he took care of the store and his customers. He prided himself on working hard and instilled that attitude in me as well. If he moved locations, his coworkers would tell him that his regulars were asking where he went, and sometimes, they would start going out of their way to go to his new location. The gas station was his life. It was the only socialization he got outside of our home and family. I think in some ways he saw them as friends, but I am not sure that the gas station customers saw it that way. I could be wrong. Regardless, these people meant something to him. They were his only source of community and companionship

Embarrassment

Truthfully, I was embarrassed of him. He worked right around the corner from my high school, and he knew many of my teachers and friends. It was not because he went to teacher conferences or saw me hanging out with them. He knew them from the gas station. He may not have even known their name, but he could tell

you what they always got. He would say, "Hey, I saw one of your friends come into the station last night. I don't know what her name was, but I asked about you, and she said you guys are friends. She got a slushy and a bag of chips."

I always felt guilty watching him work because I knew it was taking a toll on him physically and mentally, but he always said he did it because of how much he loved our family. Liu et al. (2024) quantified how a working-class poor lifestyle decays health, but my father was living it, and my family and I watched. My dad wanted nothing more than for us to be financially stable. It was strange because despite all his sacrifice in the name of love and financial stability, he was not often kind to my mother and me. Our house was filled with sorrow, tears, arguing, slamming doors, and rotting wood. I resented him, and I was embarrassed by him. I felt emotionally neglected by him, because the only way he knew how to apologize was with a wad of cash. It made me learn the value of the dollar not just within our home, but within our society, very quickly.

He had permanent bags under his eyes and about half of his teeth. He ate mostly fast food and Hostess baked goods. Later in his life, he had to cut up almost everything he ate because it hurt to chew. He had even pulled out his own tooth at work once. He couldn't brush his teeth because it was too painful, so he would only use Listerine. The smell still reminds me of him. I remember how he would call my mom or me at 11 p.m. asking us to bring him food, and he would raise hell if we argued. He always ordered a plain Whopper, a large fry with no salt, and a large vanilla shake from Burger King. He knew he would get fresh fries if he ordered them without salt, and he could always tell if the fries were old or if the cooks needed to change the oil. He chain-smoked cigarettes like nobody else. On a good night, he would get maybe six hours of sleep. When he was 18, he had open-heart surgery to have an artificial aortic valve put in. He was told that around 40 he would most likely need another heart surgery. He never went to the doctor again or even thought about getting another surgery. He could not afford it, and any medical procedure terrified him. Even if he overcame his fear,

paying for rent and groceries took priority over healthcare; a situation many households that struggle financially find themselves in (Kushel et. al. 2005). He had no work benefits, no healthcare, nothing. I found myself wondering from a young age what would kill him first: the cigarettes, his diet, lack of sleep, high stress, or his preexisting health condition. Maybe it would be a freak work accident like a gas leak. Maybe the gas fumes would kill him slowly. I came to the realization that he would die young when I was about 16 years old.

Mental Illness

I think his mind was very busy, as he talked to himself constantly. I think the strangest part, though, was that the words he was speaking were only mouthed. There was no sound, except for an occasional chuckle. He would even use his hands and make gestures as if he was having an in-depth conversation with someone in front of him. My mom and brother said he had been doing this for a long time, even before I was born, but it got much worse as time went on. They blamed it on a work injury he had back when he used to work in a mechanic shop where a car bumper had fallen on his head and knocked him out. Maybe it was mental illness, maybe it was loneliness, maybe it was just another physical toll work was taking on him. Maybe it was all of it. To others and even to me, he looked crazy, and he was aware of it. He would even joke about it sometimes. "Yep, your dad is crazy," he would say. He was hard to talk to because of this. You could tell him something many different times, and he would insist he was never told that, because he was never listening. He was wrapped up in his own thoughts. He was someone who you wouldn't want to encounter while you were alone at night based on looks and mannerisms. Many of my friends feared him, and the house always felt a little more peaceful when he was not home. He did not have a smartphone, so all he had was the same radio station with the same songs, day after day. He only watched the news, specifically Fox News. He would keep it on the television at work and watch it at home as well. That is, until his bosses decided it was too expensive to keep televisions in the store and took them all away. At least we got a free

TV out of it. It looked way too big for our little living room, but when you're poor, you don't complain about free stuff.

The Shame of Being Poor

He wanted to be better, but he did not know how. All he knew for so many years was work, eat, and sleep. I remember one incident when I was in middle school where his shame was revealed to me for the first time. My mom would look at houses in the area that were for sale online. At the time, we had considered moving into a house and having my grandma move in with us. One house that my mom found was not in great shape. The people who had lived there previously trashed the house before they moved. I think they were evicted. It was two stories with a basement and had a fenced-in backyard with a pool. The house needed lots of remodeling. New walls, flooring, plumbing, etc. To me, even with all its imperfections, it was the perfect house. It was big and beautiful, and more than I could have ever dreamed of. My mom, brother, and I went and saw the house without telling my dad. When we came home, my mom proposed the idea to my dad. He was angry and immediately shut the idea down. They got into an argument, and I could hear them yelling from my bedroom. My dream home was truly just a dream. He came into my room after the argument. It was the evening, and he was on his way to work. He sat me down and told me how we could never afford that house. He looked me in the eyes, with tears in his eyes, and apologized for being such a disappointing father, and said that he was sorry he could not give me more. I had never felt more guilty in my life. I was watching him work himself to death, and I dared to ask for more. How could I? He cared deeply for his family despite not always being able to show it. He was the kind of father where you know no matter how angry he was at you or what was said in an argument, no matter how long it had been since you talked, no matter how badly you had messed up, he would defend you in a heartbeat.

There has been a lot of discourse about the fairness of society. There are differing opinions about whether free health care, schooling, or more, would take away the incentive to work.

Who could possibly want to give away what they worked hard for, so others don't have to? That would be more unfair than the way society functions now, according to some. I feel very differently, but there are plenty of people who agree with this idea, and my father was one of them. Lower-class people have been convinced that with hard work and elbow grease, we can achieve anything. That it is selfish to expect government assistance, and that those who accept it simply are not working hard enough. My father often told angry stories of the people he had helped at the gas station who were using food stamps. He called them lazy and made it a point to note if they were Black or "Mexican" or not. I honestly think he was jealous and bitter. Yes, there are people who commit fraud and abuse the system. But I think what he failed to understand was that most of the people who he came across were not undeserving of government assistance; it is that our family was deserving and was not getting it. No one should have to work 80-100 hours a week for a dream that could not be realized. But dangling this fantasy like a carrot in front of the working class keeps them stuck in a cycle of work and exhaustion.

I grew up very familiar with the saying, "Well, life isn't fair," hearing it from my parents whenever I thought something was not right or that I was being treated unfairly. I always thought it was ridiculous and was just a way for my parents to deflect when they had no good counterargument. As I grew older, I concluded that the saying really is true. My parents had worked very hard throughout their lives and had little to show for it. No matter how hard they tried to work with the system (with the few resources they had), they found themselves in the same financial situation repeatedly. I could not understand this as a child. What separates my childhood perspective on fairness from my adult perspective is that I now recognize that even when life is unfair (which it often is and will continue to be), you must keep going, and you must take care of yourself at the same time.

June 15, 2023

I remember the day my father passed vividly. We were sharing a car at the time because my

car was totaled in a car accident earlier that year. He was working the day shift at the time. He decided that the night shift was not worth the toll anymore and threatened that he would quit if his boss did not let him switch. Therefore, I had to drive him to work around 11:00 in the morning. As we were walking to the car, he told me he had good news; he was going to try to quit smoking again. The last time he had tried to quit was back in 2020, so this was a big deal. In hindsight, this may have been a last-ditch effort to save his life. We had gotten into an argument the night before, so I was not really in a talkative mood with him, but I told him I was excited for him. He said he was disappointed because he hoped that if he quit smoking, I would quit vaping at the same time, and we could get through nicotine withdrawal together. I told him I would try quitting someday but that I was not ready to quit. We shared a laugh because I made a joke that we would kill each other if we quit nicotine at the same time. He never complained of feeling sick that day or the days prior. He was in a good mood and was even hopeful for the future, something that I did not often see from him. I dropped him off at work, and unfortunately, that was the last time I would ever speak to him again. Around 6:30 that night, I was on my way to his work. I was going to drop the car off to him and have my friends pick me up so I could hang out with them without having to worry about picking my dad up from work. About a half mile down the road from his work, I got a call from my uncle but declined it with the intent of calling him back when I parked. He immediately called again, so I answered. He explained that the hospital had contacted him and said that my father was rushed in and they had no information on what happened or his condition. As he was telling me this, I was pulling into his work, where there were two cop cars sitting outside. I rushed in and asked what happened, but they said they did not know and that I needed to get to the hospital. On the way, I made calls to friends and family members. I was the first to arrive, and I was terrified. I had to give one of the nurses my general information and then was asked to wait for someone to speak with my family, and I soon.

After my uncle arrived, we were brought into the back of the emergency room. I immediately

knew something was very wrong when they took us into a room with a couple of chairs and a table with tissues on it. I knew something bad had happened, but nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to hear. After my aunt arrived, two doctors came in and explained that my father had had a heart attack and that they tried performing CPR but unfortunately could not save him. I screamed in a way I never had before. It was guttural—a sound I didn't even know I was capable of. I'm certain it echoed through the hallways of the sterile emergency room. We had to wait a gut-wrenching hour before my brother could arrive to break the news to him. I called my mom, who was living in California at the time, to tell her the news. She screamed too.

They allowed us to see him but warned us that he was in bad condition. I did not care; it was my dad. He had bruises all over his body. There was a plastic tube jammed down his throat. His skin was pale, veins bulging, dried blood on his lips. That was not my father, only a shell of him. He lay there, lifeless, in the sterile white room. His skin was cold to the touch. I didn't shed a single tear looking at him. I remember thinking to myself over and over again, "So this is just it, huh? You were fine earlier, and now you're dead?" I had never seen a dead body like that before, but it did not affect me the way I thought it would. A serene numbness fell over me. I was angry, hurt, confused, distraught. My whole life was turned upside down. It was just him and I living at home. I was only 19 years old. My new adult life had barely scratched the surface before being torn apart. What the hell was I going to do? Where do I go from here? My brother and I went home after the hospital so I could gather my things to stay at my sister's house for the night. The house had changed. Never again would I walk into my dad sleeping on the couch with Fox News blasting. It was quiet and dark. The smell of his cigarettes still lingered. I made sure to grab the black and grey flannel jacket that he liked to wear. A jacket I never cared about previously, suddenly held so much weight. I had never felt more alone than that night staying at my sister's. Everything I knew was changing, and I was scared.

Although I do believe that there is some

merit behind working hard for what you have, no one should have to work themselves to death just to scrape by. How is that fair? Even if you get a job and work as hard as you can, you may end up like my father. He worked every single day for years and years, sacrificing his health, sanity, family time, everything, just to have nothing to show for it in the end. He wanted a different life so badly. His health was in decline, and he knew it, but he could not do anything about it because he did not have healthcare and could not afford a doctor's visit. Leading up to his death, he talked to several family members about what to do if he died. He asked my uncle to take care of me, which sounded absurd at the time, because what would possibly happen to him? While cleaning the house after his death, we found several hidden bottles of aspirin. I had lived with him through the months prior to his death and never knew he was taking so much aspirin. I can only assume that he knew he was sick but did not want to tell anyone because he knew there was nothing that could be done about it. The last thing he ever saw was the walls of the gas station that he spent so much time at, missing family dinners, band concerts, life milestones, everything. We did not get a goodbye; we did not get to tell him one last time that we loved him. Do not worry, his bosses sent us some money for the funeral but blamed us for working him to death after shorting his final paycheck. It was one last signal from them that my father was nothing more than a dollar sign in their eyes. We were grateful for the money from his bosses because it did help with some funeral expenses, but in the end, money could not replace my dad. We were also given the ambulance bill from my dad (who died before he even got to the hospital) of \$31,000. Luckily, we had family members who informed us that it was not our responsibility to cover that bill. How unempathetic have our healthcare systems become to send us a giant bill after a traumatizing family death without an explanation that it is not our financial responsibility?

Aftermath

I am left with my wonderful mom, who is a DoorDash driver to supplement monthly Social

Security checks, but she still struggles to keep up with bills. She moved back to Michigan after my dad's passing. It took weeks to clean the house. He was a filthy man who never picked up after himself and believed that it was the sole responsibility of women to clean. I simply could not keep up with cleaning on my own. The bills were behind, and my mother and I barely had enough money to get caught up, which took months. Everything had to be transferred out of his name and into my mother's, except for the car, which went to my name and was sold shortly after. Every task was an uphill battle. Every company needed to hear the story of his death along with a copy of his death certificate. No one made these tasks easy on my grieving mother and me. Although my mother and father had a complicated and rocky relationship, he was her husband of 19 years, and she was grieving too. Our mobile home was broken down and old. It was built in the 70s, and it was easy to tell its age. Over time, my brother helped pay for us to get things like the shower and flooring fixed, but eventually we ended up moving. The year following my father's death was a struggle to keep food in the house. We applied for food stamps and were told we would only be given \$18 a month. We applied for a no-cost government assistance program to fix the gaping hole in our roof and the floor that was caving in. However, after over six months of waiting for an estimate, we were told that our house would be too expensive to fix and that we were on our own. My mom bought a used 2008 Jeep from someone we knew, which ended up being a money pit, costing her thousands of dollars in repairs that she did not have. The consequences of long-term financial instability had claws in us. Life felt hopeless. I was losing faith in our survival as I watched my childhood home decay around us. Navigating bills and insurance in ways we never had before was scary. There were so many times when we just wanted my dad to come and help, but he was gone. This was all happening because he was gone. In the spring of 2024, my mental health was becoming worse. I would cry myself to sleep thinking about my dead dad, reliving the day he passed over and over again. I attempted to find a therapist, but since I had Medicaid insurance, it was nearly impossible. I thought I finally found

one until after two sessions, when she explained that she actually did not accept my insurance, so I stopped seeing her. After that, I gave up on looking. Calling office after office to be rejected, waitlisted, or sent to voicemail was exhausting and created even more anxiety. As of February 2026, I am losing my health insurance altogether. I cope the best I can, and time has helped heal the wound, but it will forever be a scar on my heart.

My Mental Health and Struggles

I think about him every day, and I struggle with his sudden death at work. I find myself wondering if maybe things could have been different. Maybe if he had healthcare, he could have gotten help. Maybe if he was making a livable wage, he would not have had to work so much. Maybe he could have seen me graduate from college, get married, have kids and grow into adulthood. Instead, I am left with his memories and his credit card debt. Every year that passes, I worry that as I grow old, his memories will slowly be forgotten. His grandchildren will forget him, and my children will never know him. He'll never get to see me live a happy life as an adult. How could anyone possibly hear this story and think that this is fair?

Even today, life can feel like an uphill battle. There's always a car breaking down, a bill that is behind, or a part of our home that needs repairs. Sometimes I feel like the only thing I can do to make it better is to bury myself in work and school. Keep myself as busy as possible so that I don't have time to stop and feel. I go to school full time while working on the weekends as a server. I often find myself feeling overworked and stressed, and I struggle with procrastination, which adds to these issues. My goal is to obtain my B.A. in psychology, which has been achieved as of May of 2026, take a year or two off from school, then go back to get my master's degree and become a mental health counselor. I never feel like my work is good enough or that I am ever working hard enough. That there is always something more I could be doing. My job often makes me feel stressed, and there are days when I wake up feeling nauseous from anxiety, thinking about going. I am not the type of person to call

off, though. I fear criticism and repercussions for doing so, so instead I ignore my mental health and go anyway. I cannot stand the idea of not having anything to do, and in my free time I feel paralyzed. It feels wrong to relax. It feels too taxing to commit to a hobby. I keep reminding myself that if I work hard, I will be able to move up in socioeconomic status and build a better life for myself and my family. The only issue with that is that my dad thought the same thing. That despite the struggle, it will all be worth it in the end, right? What if I am trapped? Even if I find success soon, I could still face negative outcomes like chronic illness later in life, similar to what Anderson (2019) found.

Conclusion

I know the statistics. I know my odds. I refuse to let them define me. I refuse to stay in this situation that has been passed down to me. I will continue to pursue my education, and every day that passes is one step closer to achieving my goals. Sharing my experiences in this autoethnography has reminded me of my strength, and I hope that it can inspire others. If you were given a bad hand or feel trapped, know that you are not alone. Resilience is power, but that does not mean that we must be content with our situation. Recognizing the systems that we are in is the first step to changing them. I have changed my lifestyle habits and prioritized my health more. I now go to the gym four times a week with the goal of becoming stronger and healthier. I have changed my diet to prioritize foods that are healthier for me, and in the meantime, I have learned I enjoy cooking a good bit. Teaching myself was challenging in the beginning, but I love trying new recipes. Building a gym routine was very hard in the beginning as well, and even now there are days when I really do not want to go. I am not perfect: I like to go out and drink on the weekends, stay up late, and eat those greasy foods that I know are not very good for me. I do not always sleep as much as I should. Going to the doctor scares me, as I do not handle medical issues very well. But all I can do is try. If there is one thing I have learned about myself, it is that I am a fighter. I am certain that I will never stop fighting to better

myself. I recognize that I am resilient. Despite all my life experiences and struggles (and the future struggles that are certain to come still) I am on track to have a happy and prosperous life. All my horrible experiences have made me stronger. The reality that the world will not stop moving for you, even when someone dies, hit me hard and fast. I picked myself back up, and I kept moving. Although I did not really have a choice, I still did it despite how hard it was. It is still hard. Even writing this has been incredibly hard. I do not think I would be this resilient if I were born into a rich family who never struggled. I look around at the other people my age who have not faced the kinds of struggles that I have, and I feel that we are fundamentally different. My experiences shaped me into who I am today. I think everyone should face a healthy level of challenges throughout life. However, people are not just facing challenges; people are scraping by, barely staying afloat. People should not have to suffer to learn strength and independence. Our government and social policies are watching us struggle and telling us to work harder to fix it.

Working-class poor Americans cannot simply be expected to work themselves to death to fix societal-level issues. It is up to our government to make our healthcare systems more affordable and accessible for all. A healthy life is something that every human should have the right to, regardless of socioeconomic status. This work begins by supporting government policies that make changes to the way our healthcare systems currently function and voting for government officials who support these policies. If meaningful changes to American healthcare systems and costs can be made, it could better the health of many working-class poor Americans by removing barriers to accessing healthcare and promoting positive health behaviors.

Many people know that the working-class poor exist and that they are struggling. Lots of people have had at least one bad experience with health insurance, a strained budget for the week, or a lost loved one. But if anyone reading this paper can take one thing away when finished, it is that this experience, these struggles, are happening to millions of people in this country. Not everyone comes out of

them stronger or more resilient. Many of them cannot pull themselves through. They cannot bring themselves to talk about it or ask for help. Their stories are left unseen. They are the kid you see walking to school every day, the person who sits next to you in class, or the man who works at the gas station you stop at every morning before work who knows your order by heart. By publishing my story, I prove to myself and the world that I am breaking the cycle.

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