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The current issue is the third of the eleventh volume of the *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications (AJMMC), published by the Mass Media & Communication Unit of* Athens Institute.

Gregory T. Papanikos
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25th Annual International Conference on Communication and Mass Media, 11-15 May 2026, Athens, Greece

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- Submission of Paper: **13 April 2026**

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Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications
Volume 11, Issue 3, July 2025 – Pages 139-156

Redefining Fame: How Generation Z Defines Celebrity in the Digital Age

By Amiee Shelton[±] & Cooper Hughes[*]

This study examines the shifting attitudes and beliefs of Generation Z regarding celebrity influence, the evolving definition of a celebrity, and the distinctions between micro-celebrities, A-listers, and internet phenomena. Through a series of focus groups from 2015 to 2025, participants explored how their views on celebrity influence are shaped by changing values, preferences, and the digital landscape. The findings reveal that Gen Z evaluates celebrity status not only through visibility and social media presence but also by examining the projects, skills, and talents that underpin a celebrity's success. Participants emphasized that micro-celebrities and internet personalities, who often have smaller but highly engaged followings, are valued for their relatable content and the authenticity of their creative or professional pursuits. In contrast, traditional A-listers, often associated with significant achievements in film, music, or other established industries, were recognized for their visibility and polished personas, but were sometimes perceived as less accessible. Viral internet phenomena, while impactful, were noted for their short-lived cultural relevance and lack of sustained creative output. This study highlights how Gen Z's evolving opinions and criteria redefine celebrity status, emphasizing the interplay between talent, projects, relatability, and influence. These insights offer critical implications for brands, media, and researchers seeking to navigate the dynamic landscape of celebrity influence in the digital age.

Keywords: Gen Z, Celebrities, A-List, Micro-Celebrities

Introduction

In the digital age, the definition of celebrity has undergone a significant transformation. While traditional A-list celebrities—actors, musicians, and athletes—once dominated public attention through mainstream media, the rise of social media has democratized fame. Micro-celebrities, internet influencers, and viral sensations now compete for cultural relevance, often engaging with audiences in more personal and interactive ways. This shift is especially pronounced among Generation Z. This cohort has grown up in an era where social media serves as both an entertainment platform and a space for identity formation. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z does not solely rely on Hollywood, the music industry, or professional sports to identify cultural icons. Instead, they gravitate toward figures who align with their values, provide relatable content, and offer a sense of authenticity.

This generational shift has a profound impact on traditional notions of 'celebrity status.' The appeal of micro-celebrities and digital influencers lies in their accessibility

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and perceived authenticity, whereas traditional celebrities are often perceived as distant and overly curated. This evolving perception of celebrity has implications for media industries, marketing strategies, and the broader cultural understanding of fame.

As the concept of what it means to be a celebrity shifts, brands and media organizations must adjust accordingly. Older forms of celebrity endorsement may be growing less effective among younger audiences, who increasingly trust and relate to the forms of direct engagement pioneered by micro-celebrities and influencers (Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). Companies trying to engage with Gen Z are turning to partnerships with digital creators who embody authenticity, relatability, and sustained engagement, rather than relying solely on the star power of traditional celebrities. The changing perspectives of Generation Z regarding celebrity culture highlight the growing importance of authenticity, engagement, and meaningful content in determining contemporary influencers. Even though traditional A-list stars are still held in high esteem, micro-celebrities and digital influencers are reshaping the understanding and value of fame. This transformation, driven by social media and evolving cultural norms, presents both new opportunities and challenges for brands, media, and researchers navigating the future of celebrity influence. Grasping the essence of these changes will be crucial for anyone who wants to interact with a generation that values genuine connection.

This study aims to investigate how Generation Z perceives and interacts with various types of celebrities within the digital landscape. Through a series of focus groups, this research explores the factors that influence Gen Z's perception of celebrity status, including authenticity, engagement, and the nature of content creation. By analyzing the distinctions between A-listers, micro-celebrities, and viral internet figures, this study provides insights into the evolving criteria for celebrity influence and its implications for brands, media, and researchers when considering how to communicate and influence this important generational segment.

While fame and heroism have existed for thousands of years, celebrity as a distinct cultural phenomenon is relatively modern. As Boorstin (1962) defined it, a celebrity is "known for their well-knownness" (p. 57). However, it was not until the advent of mass media that the concept of celebrity gained its contemporary form and significance. The concept of celebrity has evolved significantly in the fast-paced digital era, making this 10-year project salient to marketing and branding initiatives.

Literature Review

The rise of celebrity often follows a narrative arc, as described by Gabler (2001), which includes the discovery of the individual's unique talents or personality, followed by a progression of public achievements and personal challenges. This storyline positions the celebrity as both exceptional and relatable, providing a framework for audience engagement (Kurzman, Anderson, Key, et al., 2007). By the late 20th century, however, the criteria for celebrities began to shift. Fame no longer requires talent, beauty, or achievement. Instead, visibility alone could confer celebrity status. Gabler (1998) observed that fame had become increasingly detached from

traditional markers of merit. Rojek (2001) introduced the term *celetoids* to describe a new breed of temporary celebrities—individuals who achieve short bursts of fame through media spectacle rather than sustained accomplishment. These included reality show contestants, viral video stars, or other figures who gain attention for a moment before fading from view. The internet and social media have accelerated this process, expanded the idea of fame and made it accessible to "ordinary people," often with little lasting cultural significance (Kurzman, Anderson, Key, et al., 2007).

Despite their ordinary origins, celebrities are no longer perceived as entirely "like us." The privileges society grants them, particularly attention, reinforce their elevated status. Even the most mundane details of a celebrity's life can attract widespread interest, not just from devoted fans but from the public at large, simply because of their recognized status. In addition to cultural fascination, celebrities are often positioned as authorities on various topics, particularly beauty and fashion, where their opinions and endorsements are widely circulated, despite relying on professional stylists and consultants themselves. Moreover, they are frequently treated as credible voices on broader issues, including politics, health, and religion, further amplifying their influence in contemporary discourse (Kurzman, Anderson, Key, et al., 2007).

The concept of celebrity has evolved significantly in the fast-paced digital era, with traditional A-list celebrities now sharing cultural influence with micro-celebrities and internet personalities. Historically, fame was primarily dictated by mainstream media, but social media has decentralized the process, allowing individuals to cultivate celebrity status through digital platforms (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This shift is particularly noticeable among Generation Z, a demographic that has grown in an era where fame is more accessible, interactive, and fluid. Understanding how Gen Z perceives and evaluates celebrity status is critical for media professionals, brands, and researchers seeking to navigate this evolving landscape.

Generation Z, typically identified as the group born from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, has been raised in a predominantly digital media environment. This is an age cohort that primarily uses a digital world in their everyday life, one that seems omnipresent and provides information at their fingertips. It is an atmosphere that fosters a type of information literacy and an ease with consuming and producing content (Panagiotou, Lazou, & Baliou, 2022). Unlike prior generations, Generation Z doesn't look exclusively to Hollywood or the traditional entertainment industry for cultural icons. They look to people who align with their values and provide relatable, unfiltered content (Cotter, 2019). This generation has a stronger desire than previous generations for public figures to be "real"—at least a perception that these individuals represent the natural state of the person, rather than the highly cultivated, artificial image associated with fame (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Social media has introduced new personalities to this generation, creating or reinforcing attitudes towards the idea of authenticity. Gen Z views authenticity as figures who share parts of their lives, including their hardships and triumphs, with the public, most often through the controlled media of social media platforms. Social media is a controlled medium where users determine the content's messaging, placement, and design. New controlled media platforms have provided new ways of building fame and attention, directly impacting the concept of "celebrity status." According to Rojek (2001), the idea of celebrity is related to either ascribed status (such as royalty or lineage),

achieved status (based on personal success), or attributed status (such as media attention or self-branding). With this understanding, it becomes important to create a categorical approach to the celebrity phenomenon (Turner, 2014). The common ground between these categories is the media.

According to Povedák (2014), A celebrity is, above all, an individual whose fame is manufactured and maintained by the media; without media exposure, their visibility would likely fade. In contrast, he defines a second category as the "Hero." Heroes are deeply rooted in the collective cultural imagination, sustained through narratives, songs, and popular folklore—they are figures of the people. A third category is defined as the "star." Stars are constantly illuminated by public attention, and their fame typically carries a more positive and enduring aura. Stars often attract a more loyal and enthusiastic following than conventional celebrities. When viewed on a symbolic scale, celebrities occupy the base level, heroes sit at the top, and stars fall somewhere in between. Stars have surpassed the fleeting fame of celebrities, as they remain products of mass media. Only when their recognition persists independently of media influence can they truly be regarded as heroes (Both & Péter, 2014, p. 140).

Richey (2016) conceptualizes celebrity status as the result of accumulated profit generation; however, her analysis extends beyond traditional film stars to include individuals whose prominence and popularity are primarily sustained by the evolving dynamics of media systems. Traditionally, celebrity culture was centered on the personalities promoted by radio, television, and magazines. Fame, in those days, was something that only a few people had access to (Rojek, 2001). Thus, the traditional view of traditional celebrities, or A-listers, is that they have achieved fame through large-scale industries such as film, music, and sports.

In Hollywood and the entertainment industry, the terms "A-list" and "B-list" refer to the level of celebrity a person has achieved. A-list stars are typically the most famous and influential, known by most people and frequently featured in significant projects. B-list celebrities are still recognized and have a level of fame, but their fame is not as high-profile or widely recognized as that of A-listers, often appearing in supporting roles or smaller projects. Their visibility is reinforced by mainstream media, industry awards, and high-profile endorsements (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010). However, as Spálová, Mikuláš, and Púchovská (2021) demonstrate, it has become common practice for traditional celebrities to extend their fame into the digital media sphere, thereby broadening their public fame and attention. This expansion, in some cases, introduces these traditionally aligned celebrities to the younger demographic. "Therefore, it cannot be generally concluded that there is a single indication pointing to the fact that these (originally) non-Internet celebrities would be currently less connected to the Internet than those who gained their fame exclusively through digital media" (Spálová, Mikuláš, & Púchovsk 2021, p. 46).

Digital media created a new entry to conceptual and categorization-based approaches to the subject of celebrity. Micro-celebrity was first introduced in the context of adult webcam performers who earn income by cultivating a digital persona (Usher, 2020, p. 171). The concept has since broadened, with Chan & Gray (2020) describing micro-celebrity as "the state of achieving fame that is rooted in digital environments" (p. 356). In contrast to traditional forms of celebrity, micro-celebrity is intricately tied to the economic and structural logics of digital social media platforms,

where visibility is less important than turning the self into a marketable product. As more people were able to create content that attracted large numbers of an audience, the ability to sway public opinion from a controlled media platform grew. Thus, the term "influencer" was coined referring to an individual who leverages their expertise or persona for promotional purposes. Influencers largely embody a modern adaptation of traditional opinion leadership within the context of digital communication. An "Influencer" refers to an individual who leverages their expertise or persona for promotional purposes. Influencers largely embody a modern adaptation of traditional opinion leadership within the context of digital communication.

Understanding the term "influencer" requires emphasizing its roots in the concept of the "opinion leader"—an individual whose perceived authority and expertise enable them to shape public attitudes and behaviors. The traditional definition of an opinion leader is a person who can deliver messages from mass media to local personal networks. The paradigm encompasses traits such as personal involvement, product familiarity, subject-matter knowledge, and a distinct public presence (Chan, 1990). Influencers often engage in what is called the two-step flow of communication. This means they receive information (from media, experience, or brands), interpret it, and then pass it on to their followers, shaping how others understand that information. They actively gain influence through this process by establishing themselves as trusted intermediaries. Opinion leaders, conversely, are more traditional figures (like academics, columnists, or community leaders) who mostly share information they receive directly from news media, rather than from firsthand experience or engagement. They tend to interpret and repeat existing information rather than generating new insights through personal use or experimentation. However, Hunt & Gruszcynski (2023) explain the concept of influencer in the new media ecology by the term *horizontal* two-step flow, wherein non-media actors serve as opinion leaders, accounting for the social media phenomenon. Therefore, influence doesn't just come from traditional media or experts—it flows laterally among peers on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube.

Based on this research, a categorical division regarding influencers or opinion leaders is based on the size of the community, the platform used by the influencers, or the role the influencer takes. Backaler (2018) suggests a rather pragmatic approach to understanding levels of influence, dividing influencers into three categories: (1) celebrity influencers, (2) influencers within a specific category, and (3) micro-influencers. Categorized further, the term "microcelebrity" refers to a specific level of public fame and visibility. Micro-celebrity is "a state of being famous to a niche group of people" (Marwick, 2013, p. 117). In contrast, a micro-influencer has a social media presence larger than that of a normal person but smaller than a celebrity's, typically ranging from 1,000 to 100,000 followers. As the phenomenon of micro-celebrity continues to develop, scholars have increasingly aimed to expand its conceptual boundaries and enhance its representational inclusivity. The notion of subcultural micro-celebrity, as offered by Raun (2018), provides a more nuanced framework that accounts for marginalized digital identities. Marwick (2015) furthered the specificity of the lexicon.

In contrast to A-listers, who often rely on uncontrolled media such as mainstream channels for recognition, micro-celebrities cultivate fame through more personal

platforms, including TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram. For them, consistent and often interactive performance is key to staying on top (Abidin, 2018). These individuals may not be widely known, but they maintain robust parasocial ties with their audiences, resulting in a following that is both engaged and loyal (Labrecque, 2014).

It is apparent that the concept of fame has been redefined by the emergence of these "micro-celebrities." Although A-list stars are still acknowledged for their achievements, Generation Z views them as increasingly unrelatable due to their wealth, high social status, and overly managed public personas (Jin & Ryu, 2020). Micro celebrities, on the other hand, are viewed as much more approachable and engaging, creating an aspect of familiarity that is often lacking in the relationship between the public and traditional Hollywood heavyweights. These microcelebrities, as well as traditional celebrities, are a priori dependent on the ability to brand themselves (Spálová, Mikuláš, & Púchovsk, 2021). Our research seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How does Generation Z perceive and define "celebrity"?
- How does social engagement impact Gen Z's understanding of celebrities?
- How is celebrity status achieved and maintained according to Gen Z?
- What factors lead to fame according to Generation Z?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate how Generation Z perceives and defines the paradigm of celebrity. This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilizing focus group discussions as the primary method for data collection. Focus groups were chosen for their ability to generate rich, interactive dialogue and to uncover collective meanings, shared experiences, and differing perspectives within a group context. This approach was particularly well-suited for exploring the complex and evolving perceptions of celebrities among members of Generation Z.

Participants were prompted to reflect on the media figures they regularly engage with and to articulate the reasons for their attention. Each session included open-ended questions designed to elicit spontaneous, participant-led conversation about the individuals they frequently encounter across media platforms. Participants were invited to reflect on why they pay attention to certain figures and to describe what attributes or conditions they believe qualify someone as a "celebrity.

Participants were university students aged between 18 and 24, recruited through convenience sampling via course lists from a mid-sized liberal arts university on the East Coast of the USA. A total of 100 student participants took part, divided into ten focus groups, spanning the years 2015 to 2025. Each focus group consisted of 6-12 individuals. This age group was selected as Gen Z. As digital natives, Gen Z participants have grown up immersed in an online environment shaped by social media, streaming platforms, and constant connectivity. This unique cultural and technological context informs their perspectives on celebrities' fame and influence in ways that differ markedly from previous generations. Their firsthand familiarity with

platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter enabled them to speak with authority about the nuances of digital visibility and the shifting boundaries between celebrities, influencers, and micro-celebrities.

The decade from 2015 to 2025 is a strategically significant and academically rich period to examine shifts in the meaning of celebrities. Several cultural, technological, and socio-political developments during these years justify its selection. The year 2015 marks the point when social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat matured into primary tools for self-promotion and fame generation, which accelerated new forms of celebrity based on virality, relatability, and algorithmic exposure, rather than elite access or professional gatekeeping.

Celebrities began engaging more overtly in political discourse—especially during events like the 2016 U.S. election and Donald Trump's presidency (itself a case of celebrity crossover. This decade also reflects significant changes in generational media preferences, where Millennials and Gen Z increasingly bypass traditional media. By selecting the period from 2015 to 2025, the research captures a transformative decade in celebrity culture, where fame has become more decentralized, democratized, and digital. It enables a thorough examination of how audiences perceive, assign, and interact with celebrity status, transitioning from traditional hierarchies to a more fragmented and participatory celebrity economy

Each focus group lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, neutral setting in person or via video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom). A semi-structured discussion guide was employed to facilitate conversation, enabling flexibility and participant-led dialogue. The sessions began with general questions about participants' media habits. They gradually progressed to more specific prompts about the individuals they encounter in the media, their reasons for following these figures, and their personal definitions of what constitutes a celebrity.

Participants were encouraged to reflect on the characteristics they associate with celebrity status, including media visibility, attractiveness, relatability, and perceived authenticity. The format allowed for interaction among participants, enabling the emergence of collective insights as well as points of contrast in how celebrities are interpreted and assigned.

All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and key themes across the transcripts. This iterative process involved coding the data, grouping codes into broader themes, and refining these themes to reflect the depth and variation of participant responses. Particular attention was given to how participants negotiated the boundaries between traditional celebrities and micro-celebrities, as well as how factors such as appearance, media presence, and platform-specific norms influenced these perceptions.

Finally, thematic coding was employed as the primary method for analyzing the focus group data. This approach allowed for the identification and organization of recurring patterns and ideas that emerged across participant discussions. After transcribing the sessions, the data were read multiple times to ensure familiarity before generating initial codes. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured key aspects of how Generation Z participants perceive and differentiate concepts such as celebrity, fame, influencer culture, and authenticity. Particular attention was given to the language participants used to describe the various celebrity

dimensions, the values they associated with influence, and the emotional or relational dimensions of their engagement. We used thematic coding to assign labels (or "codes") to specific words, phrases, or entire responses that represented concepts or ideas. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflect key topics, attitudes, or perceptions relevant to the research question. Thus, we were able to identify commonalities across participants' views, allowing us to uncover group-level attitudes or cultural understandings. We identified themes of *authenticity*, *expertise*, and *visibility* across all focus groups. This approach also allowed us to identify shifts in tone, or emerging themes as the discussions unfolded—for example, changing attitudes toward influencers as "real" celebrities or ambivalence about fame achieved through virality.

Findings

The focus group discussions across all years provided rich insight into Generation Z's evolving and multifaceted understanding of celebrity in the digital age. Participants consistently demonstrated a departure from traditional, mainstream notions of fame, characterized by wealth, exclusivity, and curated appearances in legacy media, toward a more accessible and dynamic conceptualization shaped by social media and digital culture.

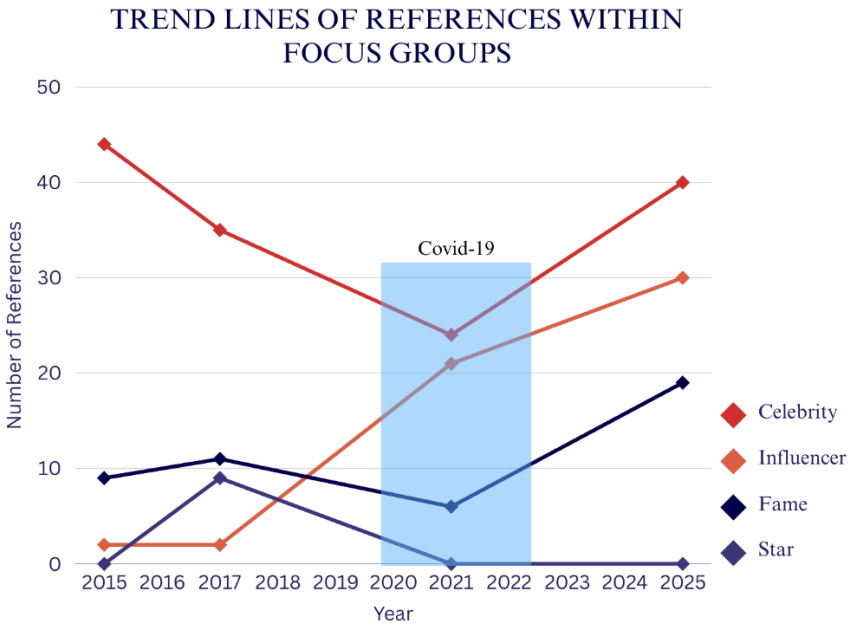
How does Generation Z perceive and define "celebrity"

For this demographic, celebrity is no longer a distant ideal mediated solely by industry gatekeepers, but a fluid and, at times, ephemeral status that can be achieved and lost through digital presence and public perception. Participants drew a clear distinction between "celebrity," "influencer," and "micro-celebrity," suggesting that the boundaries between these categories are increasingly porous. However, participants reflected a growing and evolving understanding of the micro-celebrity concept from 2015 to today. Participants from 2024 and 2025 noted that, compared to just a few years ago, there has been a noticeable shift in how micro-celebrities are recognized and valued. We found that earlier perceptions may have regarded them as minor or niche internet figures; however, recent participants now view micro-celebrities as influential cultural actors, often commanding loyal followings within specific digital communities. The focus group participants post-COVID-19 highlighted that they believed there was a shift tied to the rise of platforms like TikTok and the increasing commercialization of personal branding. For these most recent participants, micro-celebrities are no longer seen as "lesser" celebrities but as central figures in shaping trends, opinions, and online culture.

Participants from 2015 to 2025 described the traditional celebrity as someone who has achieved a level of media notoriety, often appearing in films, television, or high-profile events. However, more recent participants also emphasized that celebrity status is not necessarily permanent. Rather, it is subject to change, depending on media cycles, audience sentiment, and broader cultural conversations. In contrast to fame in

the past, which was perceived as stable and exclusive, today's celebrity is seen as contingent and transient.

Figure 1. Trend Line of Reference for Celebrities Categorization 2015-2025



In Figure 1, we illustrate how frequently terms like "Celebrity," "Influencer," "Fame," and "Star" were mentioned from 2015 to 2025. We can see that in 2015, the term "celebrity" was used the most; however, over the years, this has changed. We can observe a dip in mentions after 2015, followed by a rise in influencer mentions. It is also important to note how the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic affected the rise of influencer mentions. With the emergence of COVID-19 came an increase in influencers, driven by the surge of TikTok and the sudden shift to social media platforms. Moreover, the focus groups recognized an intermediary category: the micro-celebrity—someone who might not be widely acknowledged but wields considerable influence and allegiance within a narrow community or platform, more often in recent years. In 2015, the phrase "Micro-celebrity" was not mentioned organically in conversations among participants. However, after 2022, this terminology was commonly used in discussions. Participants revealed that individuals who fall into this category often straddle the line between influencers and celebrities, occupying an unusual cultural position.

The subjects made a distinction between internet sensations and long-term influencers. Content that goes viral is appreciated for what it is—entertainment. However, the figures that comprise the viral landscape are rarely considered actual celebrities unless they do one of two things: either follow up with entertaining, viral-yielding content or utilize their newfound visibility to launch themselves onto a meaningful online platform. A TikTok creator who is viral, for instance, is only considered a celebrity if they continue to adapt and create engaging content over time.

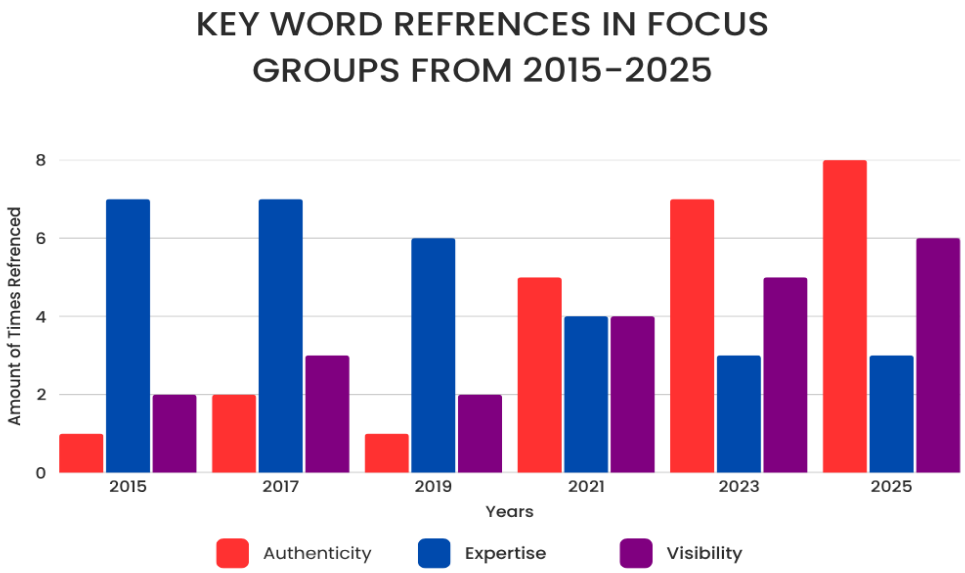
Lastly, the discussions indicated that Gen Z does not see celebrity as a binary condition (you are either a celebrity or you are not) but rather as a spectrum of influence. This generation frequently blurred the lines between micro-celebrities, A-listers, and social media influencers, indicating that micro-celebrity is now more of a context-dependent, community-driven phenomenon than a product of the industry

How does social engagement impact Gen Z's understanding of celebrity

A critical difference found between the earlier focus group participants (2015-17) and the more recent (2022-25) regarded the definition of influencers. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers were increasingly expected to be relatable, genuine, and transparent. More recent participants cited social engagement as a key reason audiences follow and engage with influencers. Specifically, participants from 2025 agreed that influencers sharing intimate aspects of their lives foster a sense of connection and trust among their followers. One participant aptly summarized this dynamic, stating, "Influencers are famous for being themselves. That's the point." This expectation for openness underscores the growing interpersonal and participatory nature of influencer culture. Participants also emphasized that authenticity is a defining characteristic of successful influencers. The groups consistently highlighted the importance of perceived genuineness, noting that it plays a central role in why audiences choose to follow individuals. Authenticity fosters a sense of trust and relatability, enabling followers to construct a more complete and more personal mental image of the influencer.

We identified themes of authenticity, expertise, and visibility when respondents shared changing attitudes toward influencers as "real" celebrities or ambivalence about fame achieved through virality. Figure 2 shows the keyword usage when describing these personas. Focus groups emphasized the centrality of authenticity in defining successful influencers. Participants from 2020 forward consistently viewed influencers and internet personalities as more relatable and trustworthy than traditional celebrities. This perception stemmed from the tendency of influencers to share unfiltered, behind-the-scenes aspects of their lives, offering direct and non-mediated interactions with their audiences through various social media platforms. Such openness was highly valued by Gen Z more recently, with participants praising influencers for "remaining genuine" and presenting lives that appeared attainable and grounded. This level of openness, according to participants, creates a sense of relatability and trust, making followers feel as though they know the influencer on a personal level, even if they've never met.

Figure 2. Key Words Used to Describe the Concept of Celebrity/Influencer/Micro-Celebrities



The idea of social media profiles led, almost invariably, to a discussion of social media visibility in all focus groups, most often discussed in terms of followers. Participants considered the number of followers to be paramount in terms of visibility. A difference of opinion in visibility was apparent between participants in the early and later years of the decade. Those Gen Z participants in the early years of this study were more likely to mention visibility regarding media coverage and magazine spreads, albeit online (not in print). Those more recent participants determined that visibility was related to high follower counts and social media. However, these more recent participants acknowledged that followers count as a factor that contributes to someone being seen as a celebrity; they were not considered decisive on their own.

In the latter half of the decade, we found that respondents believed the rise of social media celebrities has significantly transformed the landscape of marketing and cultural influence, particularly through the emergence of niche markets. Unlike traditional celebrities who cater to mass audiences through film, television, or mainstream music, social media influencers now often specialize in niche areas of interest, enabling the creation of hyper-targeted content and fostering community building. These niche audiences are highly engaged, creating a loyal fan base with deeper emotional and social investment. These content producers self-produce content that speaks directly to this targeted group. Their success is built on perceived authenticity, relatability, and regular engagement, which fosters trust and credibility. This connection is crucial as consumers seek insider knowledge and genuine passion, rather than polished corporate messaging. For example, respondents noted that a makeup artist on TikTok with 500K followers could be more influential to a niche group than a mainstream pop star. Participants remarked that one could be an "A-lister" in their own niche of the internet—be it gaming, beauty, activism, or meme

culture. This decentralization of fame suggests a shift toward fragmented celebrity, where influence is no longer monolithic but rather individualized.

How celebrity status is achieved and maintained according to Gen Z.

Study participants from 2022 to 2025 showed a more apparent distinction between internet figures who gain fame from a single viral event and those who consistently produce high-quality and/or amusing content. Content creators who establish and maintain strong connections with their audience through music, acting, activism, or niche expertise are more likely to be regarded as celebrities. Participants from all years acknowledged A-list celebrities for their achievements, but participants from 2024 and 2025 measured their worth through recent projects or visible contributions rather than legacy or status alone.

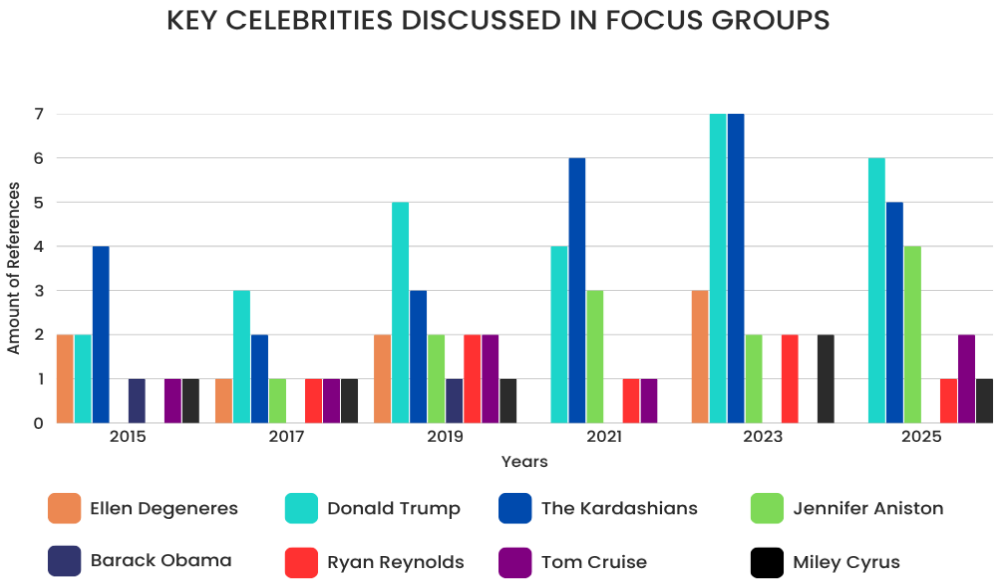
A key conceptual distinction emerged throughout the focus group discussions: "fame" and "celebrity" are not synonymous. Participants consistently emphasized that celebrity status is seen as temporary and often based on external, media-driven visibility. At the same time, fame is associated with long-term recognition rooted in talent, achievement, or cultural impact. In Gen Z's view, celebrity status can be achieved quickly, sometimes overnight, due to viral moments, curated social media personas, or association with a trending topic. However, this type of recognition is perceived as shallow and unstable, subject to the rapidly shifting tides of the media cycle. [OBJ]

In contrast, fame was characterized by participants as something more substantial and enduring. Fame, they argued, must be earned through years of demonstrated talent, relevance, or impact in a particular field. It was described as something that survives the passage of time, independent of constant media exposure or social media engagement. "Once someone is truly famous," one participant noted, "you know their name even if they haven't done anything in years." This points to Gen Z's implicit value system, which favors authenticity, merit, and cultural longevity over the more performative or transient aspects of contemporary celebrity. Interestingly, this framework led to some difficulty among participants when evaluating older A-list celebrities. Figures such as Meryl Streep or Clint Eastwood were acknowledged primarily through their reputations as "award-winning actors," but participants often could not name specific films or recent work. This disconnect highlights the generational boundaries of celebrity recognition, suggesting that fame can erode if it lacks ongoing contextual relevance for younger audiences, even if the individual's status is institutionally recognized. Figure three illustrates who respondents discussed in the focus groups, shown across the year and by the number of mentions.

On the other hand, Jennifer Aniston stands out as a notable exception. Every focus group participant identified her as an A-list celebrity, primarily due to the enduring popularity of the sitcom Friends. What made her case particularly interesting was that participants linked her celebrity not only to her role on television but also to her relationships, such as her marriage to Brad Pitt and his subsequent divorce from Angelina Jolie—events that predate many Gen Z participants' adolescence or awareness of popular culture. Despite this, Aniston was seen as a relatable and

enduring public figure, with several women across different focus groups describing her as someone they "felt they knew," even if they did not follow her on social media.

Figure 3. Most Often Discussed Celebrities Across Years of Study



This observation underscores another insight: for Gen Z, celebrity maintenance does not require active participation on digital platforms, although this is a significant path to gaining celebrity in the first place. Instead, it may rely on cultural saturation and the mythologizing of personal narratives, particularly those involving relationships, perceived personality traits, or media nostalgia.

Thus, Gen Z appears to use a dual filter when evaluating a celebrity. First, achievement and legacy (hallmarks of fame) are necessary for lasting recognition. Second, relevance and emotional relatability, often built through personal storylines or mass media narratives, help maintain visibility and resonance.

In summary, Gen Z views celebrities as volatile and potentially manufactured, while fame is perceived as authentic, earned, and enduring. The participants' framing of these two concepts reflects a media-savvy generation that is both critical of spectacle and invested in authenticity, valuing personal impact and cultural significance over media hype and temporary virality.

What factors lead to fame according to Generation Z

Fame was found to be tied to legacy, achieved through notable contributions in fields such as entertainment, sports, or activism. Fame, in Gen Z's view, is rooted in tangible accomplishments, long-term influence, and exceptional talent, whether that be in acting, music, sports, activism, or other professional disciplines. Interestingly, while authenticity was seen as essential for influencers and micro-celebrities, it was

not considered a prerequisite for fame. Famous individuals, particularly those considered part of the entertainment elite, were described as operating at a level of visibility where personal transparency was optional. Participants acknowledged that such figures could maintain their status based solely on talent or public image, without the kind of daily disclosure expected of influencers.

The focus groups also explored the distinction between being famous and being infamous. Participants highlighted that widespread recognition does not always equate to celebrity status or fame. In 2015 and 2016, participants used the examples of Monica Lewinsky and O.J. Simpson, asserting that infamy is defined by negative public attention and is often associated with scandal, controversy, or failure. While such individuals may be well-known, the nature of their notoriety excludes them from being perceived as "truly famous" in the conventional or aspirational sense. In 2024 and 2025, Gen Z participants emphasized that infamy is rooted in negative public attention, often tied to moments of public failure, legal troubles, or media sensationalism.

Groups discussed how fame, often a traditional form of recognition, is usually seen as a means to achieve authenticity. Famous individuals, especially A-list celebrities, can achieve and maintain their rank through talent, reputation, or public image, without necessarily exposing their personal lives. Between 2015 and 2017, the conversation about A-list celebrities was more focused on who was on the A-list and who was on the B-list. For example, they argued in 2015 that Robert Downey JR. was an A-List (one of the most famous people) and Adam Sandler was a B-List actor. However, in 2024-2025, instead of discussing who was in the A-list, celebrities were characterized as "unreachable" or "inauthentic." Participants argued that the polished, curated images of traditional celebrities often hindered the development of a meaningful connection with their audience, making these figures seem distant and disconnected from the everyday experiences of their followers. This, in part, respondents argued, stems from the fact that many A-List celebrities do not have a social media profile, and if they do, it is rarely updated.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that talent, creativity, and the quality of a person's content carried more weight than popularity alone. As one student put it, "Just because someone goes viral doesn't mean they're a real celebrity—it has to last." This reflects Gen Z's ability to distinguish between fleeting online fame and lasting cultural impact.

The information also emphasized the importance of parasocial relationships in shaping views of a celebrity. Respondents frequently addressed influencers or creators as though they had an intimate knowledge of them, demonstrating and even reveling in the emotional stakes that, they claim, make up the core of the reality television experience. The key differentiating factor for internet celebrities versus A-listers was the emotional closeness they had with their fans. This made them appear way more approachable and interactive than A-listers. When it came to referencing the internet's micro-celebs, fans often used their first names or usernames, showing the closeness and parasocial aspect people associate with the micro-celebs in question.

Discussion

This research examines how Generation Z is reshaping the concept of celebrity in contemporary digital society. Emphasizing authenticity, emotional connection, and sustained engagement over traditional fame. Most participants concurred that the phenomenon of being a celebrity in modern society is not exclusively the result of conventional hallmarks such as widespread public knowledge, access to various forms of media, or the receipt of commendations from acknowledged authorities. Instead, Gen Z defines celebrity through a spectrum of influence, where perceived relatability and consistent interaction within niche online communities are key indicators of status and cultural relevance.

Participants distinctly defined the ideas of celebrities, influencers, and fame. Individuals with widespread recognition in the mainstream media and those with exceptional skills in their field are often described as celebrities. On the other hand, influencers are seen as individuals who derive their influence from digital platforms and maintain continuous, direct engagement with their audience. In contrast, recognition gained through fame was viewed as more permanent and tied to types of achievement that had the potential to yield long-term, rather than short-term, effects. This layered perspective demonstrates a clear understanding of not only public figures but also the media systems in which they operate. It corresponds to a burgeoning literature on the new forms of digital visibility that enable public personas to be shaped in increasingly elaborate ways.

Throughout the various discussions, it becomes clear that the concept of a celebrity has evolved significantly with the rise of digital media, moving beyond its historical association with mass media visibility and institutional validation. Participants in this study largely agreed that being a celebrity today is not exclusively the result of traditional hallmarks such as widespread public knowledge, access to various forms of media, or the receipt of commendations from acknowledged authorities. Instead, Gen Z has changed the way we define what a celebrity is with the introduction of influencers and micro-influencers, allowing for a more diverse description than ever before.

To understand this shift, both conceptual and categorization-based approaches to the subject of celebrity are essential. The participants drew evident lines between the concepts of celebrities, influencers, and fame. They stated that celebrities are the people who are most recognized across all forms of mass media. These are the individuals who are known not just by a specific demographic but by everyone. Influencers, by contrast, are viewed as individuals who derive their notoriety from online platforms and interact regularly and directly with their followers. On the contrary, acknowledgment earned through fame was perceived as more enduring and associated with accomplishments that have the potential to deliver long-term outcomes, rather than short-lived effects. This stratified viewpoint offers a more profound understanding of the icons involved, as well as the systems of mass media and participatory cultures that shape them.

Limitations of the Study

The decade between 2015 and 2025 has seen rapid and unprecedented changes in digital culture, platform usage, and celebrity ecosystems. Focus groups conducted earlier in the decade may reflect outdated media consumption habits, while newer, fleeting digital trends may influence later groups. This temporal spread can complicate comparisons across years and challenge efforts to generalize findings. Those in the earlier groups may have retrospectively judged older celebrities through the lens of contemporary values (e.g., diversity, authenticity, or transparency), leading to historical revisionism in their assessments. This creates inconsistencies in how celebrities are defined and valued over time. As with all qualitative methods, focus groups are susceptible to non-representative sampling. If participants are selected from urban, university, or digitally engaged populations, their views may not reflect broader public opinion. Furthermore, groupthink and social desirability bias may influence participants' willingness to express controversial or unpopular opinions about celebrities. Lastly, throughout the ten years, participants' definitions of "celebrity" evolved. In the early years, traditional media figures likely dominated discussions, while later years shifted toward influencers and microcelebrities. This definitional drift can make longitudinal comparisons difficult, as participants may not have been talking about the same type of celebrity.

Conclusions

Participants' categorization showed an increasingly relevant meaning for the term "microcelebrities." This term refers to a new form of public visibility and apparent fame that individuals attain within specific online communities. Microcelebrity is understood to be famous among a small group of people, rather than a famous person to the whole world. Our focus groups discussed the rise of micro-influencers, attributed to the growth of various niche communities facilitated by social media platforms like TikTok, which allowed for the sharing of niche topics that were previously inaccessible. Social media emerged as a central force in shaping these definitions. Although participants recognized that achieving a viral moment can thrust individuals into the public's attention, they repeatedly emphasized that going viral does not necessarily equate to maintaining a consistent influence. Content creators who build trust and create a sense of authenticity by sharing unfiltered, emotionally transparent content are more impactful than those whose content is curated and promotional.

Regarding the paradigm of opinion leaders, numerous participants viewed influencing and microcelebrity roles as these so-called "opinion leaders" in their communities, especially when their content resonated with the community's lived experiences and values. This underscores the importance of contextual, rather than universal, influence in the digital age. These findings reaffirm the growing importance of authenticity in the influencer community and are particularly relevant to marketing and branding initiatives involving celebrities.

This study ultimately reveals that Generation Z has a fluid and decentralized understanding of a celebrity, rooted in cultural values that prioritize connection, credibility, and contextual influence. The rise of micro-celebrities and niche influencers disrupts the binary system of fame, introducing a more democratized model of cultural influence. These findings may be built upon in future research that explores the evolving definitions of celebrities and their effects on branding strategies, audience trust, and new technologies, such as algorithmic content curation and AI-generated personas.

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Media Complicity in Early Wartime Rhetoric: A Thematic Analysis

*By Aysel Morin**

This study investigates whether wartime conditions erode the media's critical distance from official discourse, focusing on the early phase of the War on Terror. Drawing on Media System Dependency theory and the Propaganda Model, it analyzes eight speeches by President George W. Bush and 112 *USA Today* articles published between September 11 and October 12, 2001. The study employs thematic analysis. The results reveal that immediate press coverage was markedly aligned with presidential rhetoric, reproducing themes such as moral absolutism, civilizational binaries, dehumanization, and retributive justice. The findings suggest that in moments of national crisis, heightened public reliance on the press—combined with structural constraints—facilitates media alignment with official discourse. This convergence underscores the vulnerability of journalistic autonomy in times of war.

Introduction

In times of national crisis, public reliance on mass media intensifies as individuals seek to make sense of rapidly evolving events, assess risks, and understand the implications for their lives and communities. Media System Dependency (MSD) theory, developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), offers a framework for understanding this heightened dependence, positing that media exert greater influence during periods of social disruption, when traditional interpersonal or institutional sources of information are inadequate. In such contexts, the media function not only as conduits of news but also as central architects of public understanding, shaping the meanings attached to conflict, security, and identity.

However, media institutions are neither independent of nor insulated from the broader political, economic, and ideological systems in which they operate. On the contrary, as Herman and Chomsky (1988/2008) argue in their Propaganda Model, the media operate under powerful structural constraints—most notably, concentrated ownership, dependence on advertising revenue, reliance on official sources, disciplinary flak, and dominant ideological frameworks. These constraints systematically narrow the range of perspectives that can be publicly articulated, often aligning journalistic output with the priorities of political and economic elites. Moments of national crisis tend to intensify these dynamics, further consolidating media alignment with dominant interests and curtailing critical scrutiny.

Democratic theory positions the press as a vital check on institutional power in liberal democracies. Under normal circumstances—and even in some emergencies, such as natural disasters or economic recessions—news media may be able to perform their democratic function by retaining a degree of critical posture and continuing to

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interrogate official narratives. War, as this study will demonstrate, presents a distinct case. War cultivates an atmosphere in which journalistic independence and public debate are subordinated to the perceived need for national unity. It creates conditions where dissent can be construed as disloyalty and places unique pressure on journalists to demonstrate solidarity rather than encourage critique. Consequently, under wartime conditions—precisely when public dependence on media reaches its peak— the media's critical distance from power often diminishes.

This study advances the argument that the convergence of heightened audience dependency and structural media constraints during wartime enables the press to operate as a powerful instrument of consent. In such contexts, news organizations often internalize or mirror official discourse, legitimating the government's perspectives and policies. Focusing on the War on Terror and its coverage in a national newspaper (*USA Today*), this study examines how the national crisis precipitated by the 9/11 attacks facilitated a narrowing of the press's critical distance from government narratives, resulting in news stories that frequently echoed official rhetoric. Far from serving as neutral arbiters, the press functioned as conduits of state discourse and ideology, shaping public perception of both the conflict and its designated enemy.

Media System Dependency Theory and Wartime Crises

Media System Dependency theory (MSD) posits that during periods of severe social disruption, individuals experience heightened informational and psychological needs—particularly for sense-making, guidance, and reassurance. In such contexts, dependency on news media intensifies, as mass media are uniquely positioned to meet these needs through rapid dissemination of information and privileged access to institutional and expert sources (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989).

Existing research on media dependency has primarily examined the degree of media reliance, its psychological and behavioral effects, and how these dynamics differ across media platforms. However, because large-scale national crises are both infrequent and complex, much of the empirical work in this area has focused on more localized, community-level disruptions.

Research on MSD has focused on three primary dependency goals: understanding, orientation, and play (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Loges, 1994; Morton & Duck, 2000). Understanding is aimed at gaining knowledge that helps individuals make sense of themselves and unfolding crises; orientation is about finding cues to guide behavior and choices; and play includes activities that offer distraction, enjoyment, stress relief, and connection to cultural experiences. While each goal plays a role, evidence suggests that in times of crisis, people tend to depend most on media for comprehension and guidance.

Empirical studies of local crises—such as natural disasters and public emergencies—have shown that different media platforms serve distinct informational and psychological needs. During community-level disruptions, television use typically increases as individuals seek to interpret their environment and make sense of personal experiences (Hirschburg, Dillman, & Ball-Rokeach, 1986). Radio, by contrast,

becomes more central for fulfilling practical needs, such as receiving safety updates and locating resources (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1999; Loges, 1994). Perceived threat levels have also been found to heighten reliance on newspapers and television, particularly for cognitive and social orientation (Loges, 1994). Additional research further links increased newspaper readership with heightened needs for both self-understanding and social understanding (Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993).

Research within the MSD framework also indicates that media reliance is not uniform but shaped by a range of individual and contextual factors. Among these, perceived threat consistently stands out as a strong predictor of increased media dependency, even when demographic variables are controlled (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Loges, 1994). Other factors, such as community identification and perceived social cohesion, have also been found to influence media use—particularly increasing reliance on radio during natural disasters (Hindman & Coyle, 1999). Collectively, these findings highlight how media dependency intensifies under conditions of uncertainty, fear, and the search for shared meaning.

While much of the empirical literature on MSD has focused on localized crises such as floods, earthquakes, or public emergencies, the theory's explanatory power becomes especially pronounced in the context of war. War represents a uniquely disruptive form of crisis—one that not only magnifies uncertainty and perceived threat but also elevates the symbolic and political significance of information itself. Unlike natural disasters, which are often temporally and spatially contained, war implicates broader questions of national identity, state legitimacy, and moral order. As a result, it generates a particularly acute form of media dependency, wherein the public turns to mass media to interpret complex geopolitical developments, absorb state-sanctioned narratives, and navigate rapidly shifting sociopolitical landscapes. It is under these conditions—when the need for orientation and reassurance is most intense—that media institutions exert their greatest ideological influence.

Propaganda Model: Herman and Chomsky

The Propaganda Model (PM) developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988/2008) helps explain the above dynamic. The model remains a foundational framework for understanding how structural forces shape the operations and outputs of mainstream media, particularly in liberal-democratic societies. At its core, the model challenges the idealized view of the press as an independent watchdog tasked with informing a democratic public. Instead, Herman and Chomsky (1988/2008) argue that media institutions function within a constrained economic and political environment that privileges elite interests, ultimately serving to manufacture consent for prevailing power structures.

The PM identifies five interlocking "filters" that systematically condition news content: media ownership, advertising dependence, sourcing, flak, and dominant ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1988/2008). These filters do not operate through overt censorship or direct state control but through market-based and institutional logics that subtly and persistently shape what gets reported, how, and by whom. As

Kristin Comeforo (2010) notes, this results in a media system where "freedom of expression is both bounded by, and reserved for, the elite interests of capital" (p. 220).

The first two filters—concentrated ownership and advertising dependence—reflect the structural integration of media into the market system. Deregulation, cross-ownership, and media consolidation have allowed a small number of transnational corporations to dominate global content production and distribution (Comeforo, 2010; Bagdikian, 2004; Herman & McChesney, 1997). These corporations share overlapping interests not only with one another but also with the state, which influences their profitability through regulatory policy. As a result, content that threatens political or corporate power is marginalized, while narratives favorable to elite consensus are amplified.

The third filter, "sourcing," further reinforces this alignment. News organizations, driven by profit imperatives, minimize costs by relying on "official" sources who are readily accessible and presumed credible. This structural reliance privileges governmental and corporate voices and sidelines alternative or oppositional perspectives. This process enables powerful actors to "manage" media narratives and manipulate them "into following a special agenda and framework" (Herman & Chomsky, 2008, p. 21).

The final two filters—flak and dominant ideology—function as disciplinary mechanisms. Flak refers to the negative consequences media outlets face when they challenge dominant power structures, including threats to advertising revenue and reputational attacks by corporate-funded watchdog groups (Comeforo, 2010). Meanwhile, dominant ideological currents—such as Cold War anti-communism in earlier eras or contemporary discourses around national security and terrorism—establish the boundaries of legitimate discourse.

Importantly, Herman and Chomsky (1998/2008) do not suggest a top-down conspiracy but rather highlight how media conformity to elite narratives emerges naturally from structural incentives. The result is a media system that, despite formal press freedoms, systematically reproduces the perspectives of those in power.

While the PM offers a compelling framework, it has also been critiqued for emphasizing structural constraints at the expense of journalistic autonomy. Scholars such as Sparks (2007) and Boyd-Barrett (2004) contend that the model overlooks the capacity of journalists to challenge institutional pressures or act independently. Sparks (2007) argues that the model is "blind to some of the important ways in which the dictates of the model are contested by journalists themselves" (p. 80), while Boyd-Barrett (2004), referencing the Church and Pike Committee findings, suggests that the model underplays direct state manipulation, such as CIA infiltration of media organizations.

The emergence of digital and independent media has also raised questions about the model's continued applicability. Though alternative platforms may offer space for oppositional voices, they remain shaped by structural constraints such as algorithmic curation, monetization pressures, and state surveillance (Comeforo, 2010). These forces often replicate the same systemic patterns the model critiques.

Yet it is during wartime that the explanatory power of the PM becomes most apparent. The practice of sourcing is especially central to understanding how the media operate under such conditions. In times of war, media reliance on official

sources intensifies in parallel with the public's growing dependence on the press. As audience demands for information, reassurance, and coherence intensify, news organizations increasingly turn to official sources, thereby amplifying narratives that suppress dissenting perspectives and reduce complex geopolitical realities to simplified moral binaries. As other scholars have observed, mainstream war reporting frequently reinforces oppositional framings—good versus evil, us versus them—while omitting historical context, peace-building efforts, and alternative perspectives (Galtung, 1990). In such moments, the media's structural embeddedness within existing power relations and its privileged access to political elites become more than a theoretical concern; they operate as mechanisms of consent, legitimizing state narratives, perspectives, and policies. Guided by these concerns, this study investigates to what degree the press can preserve its critical distance from official narratives during such wartime conditions.

Method

This study explores whether wartime conditions contribute to the erosion of the media's critical distance from official power by examining the convergence between presidential rhetoric and mainstream news coverage during the early phase of the War on Terror. Specifically, it investigates how *USA Today*, a widely circulated national newspaper designed to appeal to a broad and general-interest readership, absorbed, reflected, and at times reinforced the discursive boundaries established by state actors—particularly those articulated by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

The research proceeds in two stages, both guided by thematic analysis. In the first stage, the study analyzes eight major public statements delivered by President Bush between September 11 and October 7, 2001. These include: Remarks at Emma Booker Elementary School (September 11); Address to the Nation from the Oval Office (September 11); Remarks with the National Security Team (September 12); Remarks on the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance (September 13); Radio Address to the Nation (September 15); Remarks upon Arrival on the South Lawn (September 16); Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People (September 20); and Address to the Nation from the Treaty Room (October 7). These speeches were retrieved from the official White House archives available online and analyzed to identify the dominant themes used to frame the War on Terror and construct the figure of the enemy.

In the second stage, the study applies a parallel thematic analysis to *USA Today*'s news coverage during the same period. A total of 115 articles published between September 11 and October 12, 2001 were retrieved from the ProQuest U.S. Newsstream database using the keywords "World Trade Center," "attack," and "terror." After removing duplicates, 112 unique articles were included in the final dataset.

The articles and speeches were cleaned, organized, and imported into NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software. Two coders conducted iterative, line-by-line coding of the dataset to identify recurring patterns. The coding categories emerged inductively

from close reading, with emphasis on how the language framed the conflict, articulated the U.S. response, and constructed the image of the enemy. The analysis examined whether and how the news coverage echoed, reproduced, or internalized the themes identified in Bush's speeches.

Findings

The War and Enemy in President's Speeches

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush's rhetoric undertook the urgent task of making sense of the attacks, articulating the U.S. response, and constructing a coherent and rhetorically potent adversary. (Appendix 1).

In his speeches, Bush framed the attacks as an act of war and employed apocalyptic language to define the nature of the conflict. His characterization of the conflict was steeped in binary oppositions: good versus evil, civilization versus barbarism, freedom versus tyranny. Terms like "evil-doers" and repeated references to "evil" essentialized the enemy, rendering them irredeemable and unworthy of negotiation. In his address to the nation on the evening of September 11, Bush stated: "Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature" (Bush, 2001, September 11). As Mills-Knutsen (2011) argued, the use of "evil" in his speeches was not merely descriptive but functioned as a theological and apocalyptic trope that displaced rational engagement in favor of a righteous military response. Bush reinforced this with proclamations such as, "We will rid the world of the evil-doers," elevating military action to a moral imperative (Bush, 2001, September 16). This moral absolutism enabled a shift from justice to retribution. As Robert Ivie (2007) has noted, Bush's rhetorical frame substituted pragmatic foreign policy discourse with the ritual language of redemption. He portrayed America as an agent of divine justice on a mission to cleanse the world. In his address on September 20, Bush declared, "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."

In his speeches Bush framed the US response to the attacks as a war against terror. The discursive structure of this framing was anchored in militarized resolve, moral absolutism, and emotional appeal. Among the most prominent themes were militarization and national security, with frequent references to "campaigns," "conflicts," "operations," and "missions" that framed the U.S. response to the attacks as a long-term struggle requiring decisive action. This militarized framing was reinforced by calls for national unity and perseverance, with the president urging Americans to remain united, resolute, and unwavering in the face of adversity.

Bush's speeches heightened the emotional stakes of the conflict, channeling collective grief, fear, and anger into a narrative that cast the United States simultaneously as a wounded victim and a righteous agent of redemption. His invocation of *Psalm 23* during the National Cathedral memorial service sacralized national grief, transforming mourning into a spiritual mandate for war: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me" (Bush, 2001, September 14). He further declared, "Our nation is deeply grateful to the

men and women of our military, who are standing watch for freedom in this hour of danger." As Bostdorff (2003) argues, such rhetorical moves functioned as a form of "covenant renewal," binding national trauma to a redemptive mission and framing the military response as both divinely sanctioned and morally necessary.

Accordingly, in his speeches, Bush constructed a morally charged adversary. The enemy he described was not merely a geopolitical adversary but an ontological threat: "the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century" who followed "the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism" and would ultimately end up "in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies" (Bush, 2001, September 20). Through this framing, Bush positioned the enemy outside the realm of political negotiation, presenting eradication as the logical course of action.

Bush's discourse also engaged in a strategic dehumanization of the enemy. The Taliban, regarded as responsible for sheltering and supporting terrorists, were described as "barbaric criminals who profane a great religion," while the attackers were labeled "traitors to their own faith" (Bush, 2001, October 7). This rhetorical move allowed Bush to isolate radical actors while preserving a normative distinction between Islam and terrorism. In doing so, he projected an image of religious tolerance that simultaneously obscured the broader civilizational binaries embedded in the discourse.

Bush's speeches also employed fear to construct and reinforce rhetorical unity. This fear was amplified through metaphors that emphasized the enemy's shadowy omnipresence. "This is an enemy who preys on innocent and unsuspecting people... But it won't be able to hide forever," Bush warned (September 12, 2001). Such imagery cultivated a perpetual state of alertness, contributing to the formation of a securitized public sphere in which dissent could easily be framed as disloyalty (Lee, 2017). Emotional binaries further polarized the discourse: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001, September 20). As Ivie (1980) and Galtung (1990) have shown, such rhetorical constructions collapse political nuance into moral dualism—a pattern common to wartime justifications.

Repetition of mythic language, such as "we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail" (Bush, 2001, September 20), reinforced an ethos of righteous perseverance. Bush also emphasized a redemptive arc: "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail" (Bush, 2001, October 7). This rhetoric of resolve parallels what Mills-Knutsen (2011) describes as the apocalyptic logic of violence: the enemy must be eradicated not merely for security, but as a sacred act of purgation. Smith (2005) similarly argues that Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric constituted an "enthymeme of evil," in which "evil" was not merely invoked but functioned as an unstated premise grounding all justifications for war (p. 33).

Taken together, these rhetorical strategies constructed a war that appeared inevitable and an enemy who was ontologically evil, existentially threatening, and morally irredeemable.

The War and the Enemy in the News Articles

A thematic analysis of *USA Today*'s coverage in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks reveals how the newspaper framed the events, defined the

conflict, and constructed both the enemy and the legitimacy of the U.S. response. The findings indicate that the media not only echoed but at times amplified the Bush administration's official rhetoric, reinforcing a discourse grounded in civilizational binaries and moral absolutes (Appendix, 2).

Framing the Conflict: A Cosmic Struggle between Good and Evil

Relying heavily on official voices, *USA Today*'s early coverage exemplifies what Herman and Chomsky (1988) identify as the "source" filter in the propaganda model, whereby government officials and elite actors serve as primary definers of news narratives. Thematic analysis of the newspaper's reporting in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks reveals that it largely reproduced the administration's rhetoric by privileging statements from state actors. In doing so, *USA Today* echoed the administration's framing of the events as a cosmic struggle, a clash between light and darkness, freedom and tyranny, civilization and barbarism.

The coverage relied especially heavily on President Bush's statements and national addresses to characterize the events. His words were often reproduced uncritically and without commentary: "'Freedom itself was attacked this morning by a faceless coward,' Bush declared upon landing at Barksdale Air Force Base" (Keen, September 12, 2001, p. A03). "That evening, in a nationally televised address, he invoked *Psalm 23*: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me'" (Willing & Richard, September 12, 2001, p. A03).

News articles echoed this spiritual and civilizational framing. Under the headline "A day that changes America's view of terror," one article reflected that "when the twin towers of the Trade Center crumpled to the ground like so much dust, at a cost of countless lives, something less tangible was lost as well—a uniquely American sense of freedom and security" (*USA Today* Staff, September 12, 2001, p. A18). In other reports, Bush was widely quoted saying, "This was an attack on freedom. And we're going to define it as such, and we're going to go after it, and we're not going to lose focus" (Keen, September 14, 2001, p. A04).

In the days that followed, the newspaper continued to publish morally loaded quotes from Bush's speeches. His address to Congress on September 20 was widely quoted without commentary or criticism. *USA Today* reported Bush's declaration that "freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war," and noted his vow that "we will rid the world of evildoers" (Drinkard, September 17, 2001, p. A01). The coverage further highlighted Bush's framing of the American public as morally resolute. As quoted in *USA Today*, he stated, "We are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom" (McQuillan, September 21, 2001, p. A03), and insisted, "We will not be terrorized so that our hearts are hardened... We are too great a nation to allow the evildoers to affect our soul and our spirit" (Drinkard, September 19, 2001, p. A01).

These moral pairings rhetorically elevated the war beyond politics, framing it as a sacred duty. *USA Today* prominently quoted Bush's now-famous declaration, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001, September 20), a statement that echoed across headlines and commentary, reinforcing a discourse that erased nuance and demanded allegiance.

Establishing the Crisis: Fear, Shock, and National Vulnerability

Another prominent theme that emerged in the news coverage was a sense of shock, dread, and uncertainty. These affective frames infused the crisis with urgency and helped justify the extraordinary measures that followed. In Bush's speeches, fear was palpable and linked to the omnipresence of an elusive threat. The newspaper coverage rendered this fear visible, translating abstract anxieties into concrete narratives and images.

Fear was not simply reported—it was enacted in the narrative. In the days following the attacks, the newspaper ran a series of reports under the byline "Under Attack: Terror Brought Home," immersing readers in the raw immediacy of unfolding trauma. Eyewitness accounts contributed to the visceral tone. "It was like the building had been hit by an asteroid," one witness recalled. "Fire was shooting out of the side. . . . I saw at least 15 people jump out of the first building. Two were holding hands. I looked away. I couldn't take it anymore" (Willing & Drinkard, 2001, p. A.03). The emotional impact was not limited to civilians. "The televised images were horrific, and the shock and fear were palpable, even on President Bush's face," reported Judy Keen in the special edition published on September 12, 2001 (Willing & Drinkard, 2001, p. A.03).

In the days that followed, articles described workplaces evacuated, city centers turned into ghost towns, and ordinary citizens confronting the fragility of daily life. New Yorkers were said to be "gripped by fear," and bracing for another possible attack. "Eight million panicked New Yorkers sought to flee the horror of the World Trade Center tragedy Tuesday," read one headline (McCarthy, September 12, 2001, p. B.04). The atmosphere of apprehension persisted across reports, many of which emphasized that the attacks were followed by widespread fear and uncertainty over where and when terror might strike next. "America on alert: Washington making preparations," declared one article under the headline "National Nightmare Keeps Many on Edge: Government Steps Up Security Amid Continued Threats" (Drinkard, September 14, 2001, p. A.05). Another article observed, "Tuesday's deadly terror attacks are taking a psychological toll as the entire USA deals with fear, grief and anxiety" (Brady, 2001, p. B.13). The fear was real, but it also functioned rhetorically, laying the groundwork for framing the national response as a matter of righteous, spiritual, and civilizational resolve.

The Enemy: Criminal and Moral Framing

Echoing the administration's characterization of the attacks as a "war on terror," the most frequent descriptors used to characterize the attackers were "terrorist," "Bin Laden," and "Taliban." These descriptors were not used in isolation but were often embedded within narratives using morally charged labels such as "justice," and "evil." This dual framing cast the enemy as both legally culpable and morally reprehensible, aligning with the administration's narrative of justice and righteous retaliation. "As the enormity of the toll of Tuesday's terrorist attack on New York and Washington became clearer, President Bush said the onslaught had launched 'a monumental struggle of good vs. evil,'" reported one article (Drinkard, September 13, 2001, p.

A03). Another piece noted that "he has become the face of evil to the American people," referring to Osama bin Laden (Moniz, September 20, 2001, p. A02). A front-page editorial reinforced this framing, asserting that the nation would not rest until "those who committed this evil act are brought to justice" (*USA Today* Editorial Board, September 13, 2001, p. A01).

The recurrence of the word "evil" across news and editorial content positioned the attacks not merely as criminal acts requiring legal remedy but as moral transgressions demanding retribution. The convergence of legal and moral vocabularies—justice and evil—produced a discursive framework in which war became the logical and ethically sanctioned response against an irredeemable evil.

Dehumanizing Language

Although used less frequently than criminal labels, dehumanizing metaphors played a significant rhetorical role in shaping the public's understanding of the enemy. Terms such as "hunt," "trap," "track," "cave," and "lair" invoked a predator-prey dynamic that positioned the attackers not as political actors but as subhuman beings to be pursued and eliminated. "Make no mistake—the United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts," Bush was reported saying on the day of the attacks (Willing & Drinkard, September 12, 2001, p. A01). The metaphor was echoed in headlines as "Special forces hunt for bin Laden" (*USA Today* Staff, September 28, 2001, p. A01) and "FBI hunts conspirators" reinforcing a vision of justice rendered through relentless pursuit (Johnson & Morrison, September 14, 2001, p. A01). Articles announced that the administration launched a "world-wide hunt for Bin-laden" (Cox, October 1, 2001).

Descriptions of the enemy's physical concealment further accentuated their dehumanization. They were said to be "hiding" in remote "caves" (Slavin, September 12, 2001, p. A05), and moving through the terrain "like rats" (Ritter, September 20, 2001, p. A02). One physician, quoted in a moment of emotional candor, captured the sentiment starkly: "The only way to rid the world of terror is to hunt down these animals before they destroy us all" (Kalman, September 13, 2001, p. A09).

These frames stripped the enemy of political identity and recast them as prey-like targets. As one article described it, "Elite U.S. forces" were pursuing "their prey" across an inhospitable landscape and "waging war in shadows" (Stone, September 18, 2001, p. A07). Such language normalized the logic of elimination, preparing the public to accept war not only as strategic necessity but as a morally justified response.

Civilizational Binaries and Symbolic Contrasts

The analysis uncovered more than 1,000 instances of symbolic or civilizational contrasts in *USA Today*'s post-9/11 coverage (Appendix, 2). Terms such as "freedom," "justice," "civilized," and "values" routinely appeared in opposition to descriptors like "barbarism," "chaos," and "darkness." These binaries often surfaced in the quoted remarks of government officials and in the voices of ordinary citizens interviewed by reporters "We're facing a new kind of enemy—somebody so barbaric that they would fly airplanes into buildings full of innocent people," Bush was quoted

saying, "We've never seen this kind of evil before. But the evildoers have never seen the American people in action before either, and they're about to find out." He continued, "We're a nation of resolve. We're a nation that can't be cowed by evildoers. . . . We will rid the world of the evildoers. We will call together freedom-loving people to fight terrorism" (Keen, September 17, 2001, p. A10). Speaking before the United Nations and quoted directly in the coverage, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani echoed the same logic: "Look at that destruction, that massive, senseless cruel loss of human life." He insisted, "There is no room for neutrality on the issue of terrorism. You're either with civilization or with terrorists" (Drinkard, October 2, 2001, p. A01). Such framing was not limited to quotes from political leadership. A headline proclaimed, "We are all on the front line now—where civilization confronts barbarism" (Freedman, September 13, 2001, p. A13).

These discursive pairings reflected a polarized worldview—one that distilled a complex political crisis into a stark moral opposites. The pattern was not only thematic but quantifiable (Appendix 2) These binary descriptors appeared with striking frequency across the dataset, reinforcing the symbolic polarity that underpinned the public narrative of the war.

Taken collectively, the findings indicated that during the early phase of the U.S. War on Terror, the newspaper's heavy reliance on official sources significantly reduced its critical distance from the dominant political narrative.

Discussion

The findings outlined above underscore the extent to which *USA Today*'s early coverage of the post-9/11 crisis both mirrored and reinforced the official discourse. The newspaper's framing strategies—centered on civilizational binaries, moral dualism, and the dehumanization of the enemy—indicate not merely a reflection of public sentiment, but an active role in constructing a national narrative that legitimized war. The following discussion situates these findings within relevant theoretical frameworks and examines the broader implications of media complicity in the discursive production of wartime consensus.

Media System Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) provides a useful lens for understanding the press's role during times of national crisis. As public reliance on media intensifies in moments of uncertainty, so too does the media's capacity to shape belief systems and behavioral responses. In the case of *USA Today*, heightened media dependency appears to have correlated with a reduction in journalistic distance from official narratives. Rather than offering critical perspectives or alternative voices, the coverage often mirrored the administration's framing of events, elevating moral clarity over political complexity.

The official discourse's invocation of binary oppositions and the press's uncritical acceptance of them exemplify this dynamic. In the coverage these oppositions were reproduced not only through direct quotations from political leaders but also through similar language attributed to civilians. In doing so, the press helped embed these moral dichotomies into the coverage, often without sustained critical reflection.

Similarly, the press also adopted the dehumanizing metaphors present in official discourse. By describing the actions of local and federal forces with terms like "hunting," "tracking," and "pursuing" their "prey," news stories contributed to a symbolic economy in which military action appeared morally redemptive and necessary. This framing discouraged dissent and erased complexity.

The only significant thematic divergence between the administration's rhetoric and *USA Today*'s coverage lay in the emotional framing of fear, shock, and panic. While Bush's speeches did invoke fear, it was largely tethered to the image of an elusive and omnipresent enemy and served to justify vigilance and military action. In contrast, *USA Today*'s reporting foregrounded fear as an immediate and visceral experience. The scale of destruction, the disruption of daily life in New York, and the sheer magnitude of loss were rendered with dramatic vividness. Through eyewitness accounts, emotionally charged headlines, and sensory-rich descriptions, fear was not simply reported—it was enacted. This affective register transformed the attacks into a spectacle of trauma, amplifying the emotional intensity of the moment and anchoring the crisis in the everyday experience of American readers. In doing so, the coverage contributed to a discursive climate in which fear was mobilized in support of unity, urgency, and retribution.

Crucially, this alignment between journalistic and executive discourse did not emerge from direct coercion or pressure, but from institutional routines and narrative conventions. The reliance on official sources, the emphasis on unity in times of crisis, and the need to provide emotional closure all contributed to a media climate that privileged resonance over critique. While this may have served immediate public needs for coherence and reassurance, it also foreclosed opportunities for political reflection and critical engagement.

In sum, *USA Today*'s post-9/11 coverage exemplifies how mainstream media can function as a discursive partner in the production of wartime consensus. By reproducing the emotional and symbolic terms of the Bush administration's rhetoric, the newspaper played an important role in shaping the cultural logic of the War on Terror. These findings raise urgent questions about the limits of journalistic autonomy in crisis contexts and the ethical responsibilities of the press when democracy is most vulnerable.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the extent to which the press can preserve its critical distance from official narratives during wartime. By analyzing *USA Today*'s early coverage of the September 11 attacks in relation to President George W. Bush's public rhetoric, the study demonstrates how mainstream media not only mirrored but actively reinforced the discursive framework advanced by state actors. The findings reveal a convergence in tone, language, and thematic framing—particularly in the construction of the conflict as a moral struggle, the enemy as ontologically evil, and the nation's response as both just and inevitable. These patterns underscore the media's role not simply as a passive conduit of information, but as a discursive partner in the production of wartime consensus.

Theoretically, this study brings into conversation two frameworks that are often treated in isolation: the Propaganda Model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988/2008) and Media System Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). While the Propaganda Model explains how structural forces constrain media content, it has been critiqued for overstating ideological closure and underemphasizing audience dynamics. Media Dependency Theory, by contrast, focuses on how public reliance on media intensifies in times of uncertainty, enhancing the media's power to shape public understanding. By integrating these two frameworks in the context of wartime journalism, this study advances a more nuanced account of media behavior—one that accounts for both structural constraint and situational intensification. The alignment between official rhetoric and media coverage in the aftermath of 9/11 was not merely a function of ownership concentration or elite sourcing, but also of heightened dependency, emotional urgency, and narrative closure.

In doing so, the study addresses a critical gap in literature: the lack of integrative theoretical models that explain how mainstream media participate in shaping public understanding during moments of national crises. Scholarship on the Propaganda Model has tended to focus on peacetime ideological reproduction, while media dependency research has rarely been applied to analyze discourse in periods of armed conflict. Bringing these perspectives together in the post-9/11 context offers a framework for understanding how democratic institutions—especially the press—can become enmeshed in the machinery of war through routinized journalistic practices and affective amplification.

This contribution holds particular relevance for peace and media studies. If the media are to serve democratic deliberation and peace-building, scholars and practitioners must remain attentive to the mechanisms through which journalism can normalize conflict, simplify moral landscapes, and foreclose critical reflection. The case of *USA Today* demonstrates how the affective force of fear, coupled with structural dependencies and institutional routines, can render dissent unintelligible and war inevitable. By illuminating these dynamics, the study not only enriches our theoretical understanding of media behavior in wartime but also urges a reexamination of journalistic responsibility in moments when democratic values and peace are most at risk.

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Appendix 1
Major Themes in President Bush's Early Post-9/11 Speeches

Theme	Key Descriptors / Phrases
The Conflict	
Militarization and Security	Campaign, war, conflict, mission, operation, defense, military response
National Unity and Resolve	United, we will not falter, strength, great people, unwavering, resolve, American spirit
Mythic and Apocalyptic Language	Monumental struggle, good vs. evil, grave of lies, history's judgment, good will prevail
Fear and Omnipresent Threat	Hidden, shadows, danger, terror, lurking, enemy among us, unpredictable threat
Divine Sanction and Redemption	Prayer, Psalm 23, Lord, God bless, covenant, spiritual calling, God with us, US divinely charged to destroy evil for humanity
Victimhood and Heroism	Innocent victims, sacrifice, heroes, mourning, first responders, national grief
The Enemy	
Moral Absolutism	Evil, evildoers, righteous, justice, divine purpose, moral clarity
Civilization vs. Barbarism	Barbaric, profane, uncivilized, enemies of civilization, traitors to their own faith
Justice as Retribution	Bring them to justice, rid the world, punishment, they chose, vengeance
Fear, Omnipresent Threat	Enemy as hidden in shadows, omni present danger, terror, lurking, enemy among us, unpredictable threat

Appendix 2
The major themes used in USA Today's post-9/11 coverage, based on descriptors and frequency analysis:

Thematic Frame	Key Descriptors Found	Interpretive Summary	Approximate Frequency
The Conflict			
Dichotomies of Civilization	terror, freedom, evil, civilized, justice, tyranny, order, chaos, peace, fear	Aligns the U.S. with civilization and portrays the attacks and the attackers as a threat to order, progress and freedom.	1034
Freedom vs. Tyranny	freedom, liberty, tyranny, values	Moral high ground and universal appeal of U.S. action	47
Justice vs. Evil	justice, evil, evildoer, act of evil	Manichean framing of the conflict as an act of evil	123
Civilization vs. Barbarism	civilized, barbaric, terror, fear, killers,	Attacks coded as barbaric, unjustified, targeting values, horrific, justifying intervention	63
Light vs. Darkness	shadowy networks, dark threat	Conflict elevated to symbolic/mystical dimensions	33
"Most Wanted" Branding of attackers	most wanted, wanted terrorists	Frames conflict as law enforcement — pursuing fugitives of justice.	12
Fear as a Narrative Force	fear, panic, afraid, terrified	Fear is used to justify urgency, reinforce threat, and unite public opinion around policy.	216
The Enemy:			
Omni presence of threat	Waiting for the next attack, anxiety, fear, panicking citizens		324
Order vs. Chaos	Chaos, stability, endless war	Enemy associated with disorder and chaos	27
Progress vs. Backwardness	cave, mountain lair, tribal	Enemy as stagnant/primitive, U.S. as modernizing force	27
Justice vs. Evil	evil, evildoer, merciless, targeting innocents	Manichean framing of the enemy as evil incarnate	123

Civilization vs. Barbarism	civilized, inhumane, killers, beasts	Enemy coded as uncivilized, justifying intervention	73
"Most Wanted" Branding	most wanted, wanted terrorists	Frames attackers as fugitives of justice.	12
Dehumanization and Animalism	killers, inhuman, barbaric, animal, monsters, beasts	Strips the enemy of political agency, encourages punitive rather than diplomatic responses.	39

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Generative AI, Simulacra, and the Transformation of Media Production

*By Lars Konzack**

This article examines the transformative impact of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) on media production within advertising, film, and television, through the theoretical lens of Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra. As GAI technologies increasingly generate synthetic content that mimics or replaces human creativity, traditional notions of authenticity, authorship, and audience perception are destabilized. Drawing on prominent case studies, including Coca-Cola's AI Christmas campaign, Nike's "Never Done Evolving" ad, the AI-scripted films *Sunspring* and *The Last Screenwriter*, and procedurally generated television content such as *Nothing, Forever* and *Showrunner*, the study explores how GAI contributes to the proliferation of hyperreal media simulations. Employing a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, the analysis situates these examples within Baudrillard's framework, revealing how AI-driven content increasingly operates as autonomous simulations detached from any real referent. The article argues that this shift toward hyperreality has profound implications for cultural production and media consumption, challenging the boundaries between the real and the artificial and prompting critical reflection on the ethical, aesthetic, and societal consequences of AI in the creative industries.

Keywords: Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI), simulacrum, hyperreality, media production, digital culture

Introduction

The integration of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) into media production represents a significant shift in the creation, distribution, and consumption of audiovisual content. Advertising, film, and television (core elements of contemporary cultural industries) are increasingly shaped by algorithmic processes within the framework of Industry 4.0. The ability of AI to generate synthetic media, including images, text, and video, challenges traditional production models and raises questions regarding the nature of authenticity, authorship, and audience perception. Given these developments, the following research question emerges:

> *How does the application of generative AI in advertising, film, and television contribute to the proliferation of simulacra, and what implications does this have for media consumption and cultural production?*

The trajectory from CGI to deepfakes to generative AI (GAI) encapsulates a profound shift in computational media (Hutson & Smith, 2025). CGI, once a marvel of digital craftsmanship, enabled the simulation of reality with unprecedented fidelity.

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The advent of deepfakes intensified this trend, producing hyperreal audiovisual forgeries that unsettled conventional notions of authenticity. Today, GAI transcends mimicry, autonomously generating novel content across modalities (textual, visual, auditory) with an almost preternatural fluency. This evolution reflects not only technical prowess but also a paradigmatic reconfiguration of creativity itself, oscillating between wonder and disquiet.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become increasingly integral to various facets of media production and dissemination, notably in advertising, film, and television (Danesi, 2024). In the advertising sector, AI-driven content generation facilitates the development of highly personalized marketing materials by analyzing consumer data. Traditional advertising methodologies, such as staged photography and filmed commercials, are progressively being augmented or supplanted by AI-generated imagery and video. This paradigm shift not only streamlines production processes but also enhances the capacity to target specific audiences with customized content (Danesi, 2024). However, the pervasive utilization of synthetic media in advertising engenders concerns regarding transparency, as AI-generated advertisements may engender a distorted perception of products and services (Ienca, 2023).

Within the film industry, AI technologies enable digital reconstructions of actors, the creation of entirely artificial characters, and contribute to automated editing and post-production processes (Hutson & Smith, 2025; Wan, 2024; Lees, 2024). The capability to synthesize photorealistic images and performances challenges established notions of cinematic realism and the role of human creativity in filmmaking. Moreover, AI-driven deepfake technology facilitates the recreation of deceased actors or the digital alteration of performances, further complicating questions of authenticity and intellectual property (Lees, 2024; Roberts, 2022). As AI becomes more prevalent in film production, the demarcation between human and machine-generated artistry becomes increasingly ambiguous.

Television content is similarly influenced by AI, affecting both production and audience engagement. AI-driven recommendation algorithms analyze viewer preferences, behaviors, and viewing histories to curate personalized content streams, thereby shaping viewing habits (Prodhan & Mukherjee, 2024). Additionally, AI-generated scripts, automated video editing, and predictive analytics contribute to an increasingly data-driven approach to television production (Yuan, 2024; Goswami, 2024). This raises concerns about the homogenization of content, as AI systems may prioritize engagement metrics over creative diversity.

The widespread adoption of AI-generated media aligns with Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, wherein representations become self-referential and detached from any original referent (Danesi, 2024). Jean Baudrillard's notion of *simulacra* refers to representations or copies of things that no longer have an original, or never had one to begin with. In his theory, simulacra evolve through four stages: from reflecting reality, to distorting it, to masking the absence of reality, and finally becoming pure simulation, where the copy becomes more "real" than reality itself (*hyperreality*). In this state, distinctions between reality and representation collapse, leaving a world dominated by signs and images that refer only to each other, not to any external truth. As AI-generated content becomes indistinguishable from traditional media, questions arise regarding the implications of hyperreal simulations for media

consumers. If audiences engage with AI-generated narratives without awareness of their synthetic origins, the boundaries between reality and fabrication become increasingly fluid.

This study is necessary because generative AI in advertising, film, and television accelerates the creation of simulacra, reshaping how media is produced and perceived. As AI-generated content blurs the line between the real and the artificial, traditional notions of authorship, authenticity, and creativity are destabilized. Using Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, this research critically examines the cultural and ethical implications of a media landscape increasingly dominated by algorithmically constructed simulations. Keep in mind, this study uniquely applies Baudrillard's theory of simulacra to show how generative AI reshapes cultural production across media through autonomous simulation.

This paper begins by tracing the development of artificial intelligence from symbolic computation to neural networks and large language models, highlighting how generative AI has moved from technical automation into the realm of creative authorship. It then introduces Baudrillard's theory of simulacra as a framework for understanding the profound cultural shift underway, where AI-generated content increasingly simulates human creativity while detaching from any real-world referent. Using a qualitative, interpretive approach, the study analyzes case studies across advertising, film, and television to explore how these technologies contribute to the production of hyperreality. Coca-Cola's AI-powered Christmas ad and Nike's dynamic simulation of Serena Williams exemplify contrasting uses of AI in advertising, one emotionally hollow, the other narratively rich, while films like *Sunspring* and *The Last Screenwriter* challenge conventional ideas of authorship by allowing AI to generate full scripts and storylines. In television, the fully automated sitcom *Nothing, Forever* and Fable Studio's *Showrunner* platform, which replicates popular series without human input, push simulation to its extreme, creating self-referential media with no grounding in original experience. These examples collectively illustrate how AI is not just altering media production but reshaping cultural meaning itself, blurring the lines between real and artificial, author and algorithm, past and present. As audiences increasingly consume simulations that feel real but are entirely synthetic, and as creators contend with tools that both empower and displace them, the paper argues that we are entering a new phase of media history, one in which the boundaries between reality and representation dissolve, and where the cultural imagination may be driven more by machines than by human memory or intention.

Literature Review

Traditionally artificial intelligence has been a topic mostly concerned with computer science debating the right strategy to make artificial intelligence perform like a human being (Ida, 2024). The Turing test developed by Alan Turing in 1950 was considered a method to decide if a computer system had become intelligent (Copeland, 2000).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, machine learning models began to

emerge (Fradkov, 2020). Initially, these were primarily based on symbolic artificial intelligence, but over time, neural networks were developed, marking the beginning of a new era driven by pattern recognition (Macukow, 2020). This gave rise to the notion to the brink of paranoid delusions that computers might one day become conscious and even more intelligent than humans (Bostrom, 2014). This approach has been criticized by Dreyfus and Dreyfus, who argue that it overlooks experiential and context-dependent knowledge, which cannot be reduced to formal rules or symbolic actions (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). It should be noted that their critique is primarily aimed at symbolic artificial intelligence and not to the same extent at neural networks or deep learning.

Large Language Models like ChatGPT have not only been capable of translation but have also been employed in the creative process of developing written content for scripts, including dialogue (Campesato, 2024; Kim & Oh, 2025). Moreover. they have been applied across a wide range of textual practices, including but not limited to business model development, marketing materials, customer communication, academic writing, preliminary legal drafting, educational resources, and social media content, in essence, in virtually all forms of text production where language and structure are of significance (Sart, 2024; Kundu, 2023; Danesi, 2024; Legg & Bell, 2020).

It is important to acknowledge that LLMs can sometimes produce misleading outputs, as their predictions are based on linguistic plausibility rather than verified truth. When they produce absurd or incorrect things, it is called hallucinating (Campesato, 2024). In the now infamous case against Avianca Airlines, lawyer Steven Schwartz used ChatGPT to find legal precedents and included six fictitious court cases in his filing, cases that ChatGPT had completely invented. The judge fined Schwartz, another lawyer, and their firm $5,000 for submitting fake legal citations and failing to verify their accuracy, even after being questioned by the court (Milmo, 2023). The issue arose because ChatGPT, while capable of producing convincing text, can generate false information, hallucinations, that sounds credible but is not grounded in real data, highlighting the importance of human oversight. It is therefore necessary to verify the correctness of the results. Although the quality of responses has improved significantly since these Large Language Models were first introduced to the public, they are fundamentally built as probability models, so there will always be a certain risk of errors. This is also because the models do not understand external reality but have only created a model of the external world through text, which also means that it inherits the biases from the text material it has been trained on, potentially reinforcing existing stereotypes or inaccuracies (Gupta, 2024).

Likewise generative artificial intelligence can be used to create not only written text but also music, image, and film. Because GAI creates output based on large amounts of data found on the internet; it has been called into question about the legality of creating these outputs without recognizing and validating the original creators (Saka, 2025). This issue remains unresolved and falls outside the scope of this article, as it constitutes a complex legal problem in its own right.

In a survey it was estimated that 44 percent had used AI for content production in 2023 but only 35 percent in 2024 and almost 70 percent have encountered technical challenges with AI tools (Kasumovic, 2025). It is difficult to determine whether this is

a lasting trend. Contributing factors to the decline can be attributed to 1) the increasing complexity of content creation, 2) a desire to appear authentic, or 3) simply the challenges associated with integrating AI. Though it must be added that 69 percent have used AI in marketing operations compared to 61 percent in 2023 (Kasumovic, 2025). Also, almost 60 percent fear AI might jeopardize job positions, nevertheless more than 50 percent are optimistic about the impact of AI on marketing, and less than 20% fear marketeers worry about consumer mistrust of AI content (Kasumovic, 2025).

In a study, it had been pointed out that GAI plays a role in digital advertising as regards to generating ideas, drafts of initial content, refining and improving ideas through iteration, and testing, and it was suggested that advertising agencies should adopt GAI-based tools and provide training for staff (Gołąb-Andrzejak, 2023). Another study concludes that the integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) with Emotional Intelligence (EI) and social skills facilitates a paradigmatic shift in marketing toward more personalized, emotionally attuned, and ethically responsible strategies (Nadeem, 2024). This triadic alliance enhances consumer engagement and brand loyalty by enabling the creation of affectively resonant content tailored to diverse cultural contexts. However, its efficacious implementation is contingent upon overcoming epistemological inertia, ensuring technomoral integrity, and fostering meaningful human–AI collaboration.

Studies are generally in their initial phase in which they are trying out new models or approaches, reaching only preliminary conclusions (Gai, 2022; Bilgihan, Dogru, Hanks, Line, & Mody, 2024; Li, Islam, Zhang, & Behl, 2025). Given the nascent stage of generative artificial intelligence development, there remains considerable uncertainty regarding its optimal application, resulting in an exploratory approach wherein various methods are tested to assess their effectiveness (Kshetri, Dwivedi, Davenport, & Panteli, 2024). Time will determine whether these approaches evolve into a more stable configuration, though such progression remains incipient.

Several point out that the film industry is now undergoing a radical transformation due to the influence of generative artificial intelligence (Kim J.-G. , 2024; Totlani, 2023; Deng, 2024; Yadav, Mishra, & Jayarathne, 2025). This has been a long time underway with increasing use of CGI, however artificial intelligence has taken it a step further by automating content creation (Sun, 2024; Datta & Goswami, 2021). However, there is a difference between working with traditional CGI and GAI is that GAI makes most of the work, and this also means that GAI comes up with a full suggestion while traditional CGI work is a tool in which the designer has full control of the output. GAI may require some postproduction in more traditional CGI, or one can imagine GAI tools for more creator control will be developed (Leon, Hew, Ooi, Tan, & Koohang, 2025; Begemann & Hutson, 2024; Magro-Vela, Sánchez-López, & Navarro-Sierra, 2025).

Nevertheless, there is a growing focus on how humans and machines can collaborate more effectively to achieve a balanced and creative outcome (Li Y. , 2022; Mengya, Xiangning, Chi, & Zichu, 2024; Naji, 2024). The latest scholarly inquiry concentrates on the extent to which artificial intelligence may ultimately supplant traditional methodologies in film production, potentially assuming a predominant role in both creative and technical processes (Sajjad, 2024; Du, 2024; Reddy, Kathiravan,

& Reddy, 2024). In addition, legal issues regarding movie production have undergone examination (Oberting IV, 2024; Khattak, Cohen, & Taylor, 2025; Dwivedi, 2022).

Numerous analogous concerns pertaining to the utilization of artificial intelligence in cinematic production also manifest within the domain of television production, wherein similar ontological and procedural quandaries emerge. So, we have seen researchers point to the fact that television is undergoing a transformation due to artificial intelligence as well (Chugh, Kaur, Kaur, & Madhur, 2025; Allnutt, et al., 2023; Sutton, 2024; Safira, 2024). Artificial intelligence has been recognized as a disruptive force within the television industry, challenging established business models and operational practices (Caswell, 2024).

In a nutshell, current research on generative artificial intelligence (AI) is still in its early stages, with scholars exploring various models and approaches that have so far produced only preliminary insights. Given the emerging nature of this technology, there is considerable uncertainty about its most effective use. In the film industry, generative AI is contributing to a significant transformation, advancing beyond earlier technologies like CGI by enabling automated content creation. Scholars have increasingly focused on the potential for human-machine collaboration to achieve creative balance, as well as the possibility that AI might eventually replace traditional production methods in both creative and technical roles. Legal implications have also begun to surface, particularly in relation to authorship and intellectual property. Similar trends are observed in television production, where artificial intelligence is challenging conventional business models and reshaping operational practices, further highlighting its disruptive influence across the broader media landscape.

Simulacrum

The concept of the *simulacrum*, as developed by Jean Baudrillard, refers to a representation or imitation that ultimately detaches itself from any reference to an underlying reality (Baudrillard, 1994). In his theory, simulacra pass through successive stages; from reflecting reality, to distorting it, to concealing the absence of reality, and finally becoming pure simulation with no relation to anything real; "it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). With the rise of electronic media, this process has accelerated. Television, the internet, social media, and digital technologies increasingly produce images and experiences that do not merely represent reality but replace it with hyperreality; an environment in which simulations become more real and influential than the realities they were meant to depict (Danesi, 2024). As a result, distinctions between the authentic and the artificial seem to collapse. Digital personas curated online content, and AI-generated media exemplify this shift, where representations are consumed and accepted without requiring a connection to any objective truth. In this way, electronic media contribute to the proliferation of simulacra and the erosion of the real, reinforcing Baudrillard's claim that in a postmodern society, the boundary between reality and simulation becomes increasingly unstable (Baudrillard, 1994; Poster, 1990).

Baudrillard's theory of simulacra describes how representations progressively detach from reality, ultimately becoming self-referential simulations (Baudrillard, 1994). He outlines four stages: a faithful reflection of reality, distortion of that reality,

masking the absence of reality, and finally, pure simulation with no connection to the real. In this final stage, meaning arises only from other signs, not from any external truth. This leads to hyperreality; a state where simulations feel more real than reality itself, shaping perceptions and experiences while eroding distinctions between the authentic and the artificial.

The song *Unforgettable* by Natalie Cole and Nat King Cole offers a poignant example of the simulacrum in the age of digital technology and artificial intelligence. Originally recorded by Nat King Cole in 1951, the song was reimagined in 1991 as a virtual duet between him and his daughter Natalie Cole, decades after his death (Teachout, 1992). Through digital editing, Natalie's voice was blended with her father's original recording to create the illusion of a live performance between the two. This duet, though emotionally powerful, is not a real interaction, but rather a carefully constructed simulation, an audio simulacrum that evokes a sense of presence and shared experience that never actually occurred (Hales, 2017). In Baudrillard's terms, the performance becomes a hyperreal event. It feels authentic and emotionally resonant, yet it is based on an artificial fusion of temporalities and identities (Baudrillard, 1994). The duet thus exemplifies how technology can blur the boundaries between life and death, past and present, real and simulated; offering a compelling case of how AI and digital media contribute to the creation of simulacra that reshape our experience of memory, legacy, and authenticity (Poster, 1990; Poster, 1995; Danesi, 2024).

Mark Poster would say that electronic media reconfigures language, wrapping the language in ways that may undermine current stable institutions, recomposing new routines through electronically mediated communication (Poster, 1990). In Mark Posters perspective: "To copy an original means, in the mode of information, to create simulacra" (Poster, 1990, p. 10). This may be to stretch the concept of simulacrum too far, nevertheless, the idea that electronically mediated communication, and especially digitized reconfiguration of analogue messaging, has the potential to effortlessly create these simulacra without an original. This phenomenon becomes increasingly conspicuous when one considers the manner in which deep learning methodologies recontextualize source material, engendering novel content through the algorithmic digestion of voluminous datasets.

Many science fiction movies have imagined the impact of artificial intelligence over time such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *I, Robot* (2004), and *Ex Machina* (2014), however now artificial intelligence is reaching the creative industry itself. In *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), Carrie Fisher (1956-2016), the actress who played Princess Leia in the original Star Wars movies, was recreated for this by a stand-in, Ingvild Deila (b. 1987) who had the right stature, and then Carrie Fishers face was digitally mapped onto the stand-in, using advanced motion capture techniques based on 1977 footage. This approach reached mixed reviews (Sargeant, 2017; Golding, 2021). This face exchange would have been even easier with generative AI and deepfake technology that are now publicly available.

Following this line of thought in relation to artificial intelligence, the concept of the simulacrum becomes even more pronounced and complex. AI technologies (particularly those capable of generating human-like text, images, speech, or behavior) produce outputs that simulate human intelligence, creativity, and presence, without

possessing consciousness or subjective experience (Cardon, 2018). These simulations can be remarkably convincing, leading users to interact with AI-generated content as if it were authored by a sentient being. In this context, AI operates as a pure simulacrum: it imitates the form and function of human cognition while lacking its underlying reality (Danesi, 2024). Moreover, as AI-generated content becomes increasingly integrated into everyday life through chatbots, virtual influencers, automated journalism, and deepfake videos, the distinction between the original (the human) and the copy (the AI output) continues to erode. This raises critical questions about authenticity, authorship, and the nature of meaning in a digitally mediated world. Baudrillard's theory suggests that in such a context, reality itself is displaced by simulations that no longer need to reference the real, and AI becomes a key agent in the production and proliferation of this hyperreality (Cunningham, 2024). Since Baudrillard wrote this, there has been an awareness of how important it is to distinguish the real from fake news, even though it may be increasingly difficult (Morris, 2020; Danesi, 2024; Faulkner, 2022).

In the context of artificial intelligence, simulacra manifest not only as imitations of human expression but as autonomous systems capable of generating cultural artifacts that appear original yet are fundamentally derivative. Generative AI tools create texts, images, and audiovisual content that do not reference any singular reality or authorial intent, but rather emerge from probabilistic models trained on vast corpora of pre-existing data (Danesi, 2024; Hutson & Smith, 2025). This process embodies Baudrillard's pure simulacrum, wherein the output is neither a copy nor a forgery but an entirely new construct untethered from origin. Unlike traditional media that reinterpret or reflect lived experience, AI-generated content can fabricate plausible realities without experiential grounding. As such, these simulacra are not just deceptive facsimiles, they become operative realities within digital culture, increasingly shaping discourse, aesthetics, and even emotional responses in the absence of human subjectivity.

Method

The method employed in this analysis is rooted in a theoretical framework derived from Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra and simulation (Baudrillard, 1994). Through textual narrative and visual semiotic and analysis based on of selected AI-generated media (Danesi, 2024). Examples being *Nothing, Forever*, *Showrunner*, Coca-Cola's AI Christmas campaign, Nike's *Never Done Evolving*, *Sunspring*, and *The Last Screenwriter* and the study examines how each work exemplifies different stages of Baudrillard's model, particularly the third and fourth orders of simulacra. These are characterized by representations that no longer reflect reality but instead create self-referential systems, or hyperrealities. The media artifacts were chosen for their explicit engagement with artificial intelligence in the creative process and their capacity to generate representations that mimic or replace traditional forms of human-authored media.

This approach involves interpreting how AI-driven content blurs the boundaries between reality and simulation, with attention to visual style, narrative structure, and the absence or substitution of human agency (Ryan, 1992; Erickson, 2024; Danesi,

2024). By situating these case studies within Baudrillard's theoretical schema, the analysis explores the implications of AI as both a tool of media production and a force that reconfigures cultural meanings. The method is qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary, combining media theory, semiotics, and cultural analysis to understand the symbolic and societal shifts triggered by AI-generated media (Chandler, 2022; Danesi, 2024).

These examples were also chosen due to their prominence, diversity, and the clarity with which they illustrate key aspects of Baudrillard's theory. Each case represents a distinct application of artificial intelligence in media creation, ranging from procedurally generated television and film scripts to marketing campaigns that simulate historical or iconic moments. *Nothing, Forever* and *Showrunner* push the boundaries of narrative television, while Coca-Cola and Nike demonstrate how brands leverage AI to evoke emotional resonance through simulation. Meanwhile, *Sunspring* and *The Last Screenwriter* directly engage with the notion of authorship and creativity in cinema. Together, these examples offer a representative cross-section of contemporary AI-driven media practices, making them ideal for exploring how simulacra function across different genres and platforms.

The six case studies: Coca-Cola's AI Christmas campaign, Nike's "Never Done Evolving," *Sunspring*, *The Last Screenwriter*, *Nothing, Forever*, and *Showrunner*—were selected for their prominence, diversity across media sectors (advertising, film, television), and clear relevance to Baudrillard's theory of simulacra. Each exemplifies how generative AI creates simulations that blur or erase the boundary between the real and the artificial, offering tangible examples of hyperreality in contemporary media. The selection includes both celebrated and controversial uses of AI, providing a balanced perspective on its creative, cultural, and ethical implications.

These examples also reflect a spectrum of simulation depth, from AI-enhanced reinterpretations of existing media, like Coca-Cola's nostalgic ad revamp, to entirely AI-generated narratives such as *Nothing, Forever*, which operate independently of human authorship or real-world reference. This range allows for an analysis of how AI media evolves through Baudrillard's stages of simulacra, from initial mimicry to pure simulation. By spanning emotionally resonant storytelling, experimental absurdity, and ethically fraught production, these case studies collectively illustrate the shifting role of human agency and authenticity in a media landscape increasingly shaped by algorithmic creativity.

Advertising and AI

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into advertising has engendered both innovative campaigns and critical discourse. Two salient examples are Coca-Cola's AI-generated Christmas advertisement and *Nike's Never Done Evolving* campaign featuring Serena Williams.

In November 2024, Coca-Cola unveiled a series of AI-generated holiday commercials, reimagining their classic 1995 *Holidays Are Coming* campaign (Carroll, 2024). Collaborating with AI studios, the company produced advertisements featuring AI-crafted visuals of their iconic red trucks traversing snowy landscapes. While this

approach aimed to modernize the traditional campaign and expedite production processes, it elicited considerable criticism. The add came out as soulless and lacking the festive magic traditionally associated with the brand, highlighting issues like distorted imagery and an absence of emotional resonance (Placido, 2024). This instance underscores the challenges brands face when balancing technological innovation with the preservation of authenticity and emotional engagement in advertising (Manoharan, 2024).

Conversely, Nike's *Never Done Evolving* campaign, launched in August 2022 to commemorate its 50th anniversary, received acclaim for its innovative use of AI (Danesi, 2024; Chew & Gilani, 2024). The campaign featured a virtual match between Serena Williams from her first Grand Slam in 1999 and her 2017 self. By employing advanced AI and machine learning, Nike analyzed archival footage to model each era's playing style, including decision-making, shot selection, and agility. This culminated in the simulation of 130,000 games between the two versions of Williams, effectively illustrating her evolution as an athlete. The campaign was lauded for its creative application of technology to celebrate athletic progression, demonstrating how AI can be harnessed to create compelling and meaningful narratives in advertising.

These contrasting examples illuminate the dichotomy in AI-driven advertising endeavors. While Nike's campaign exemplifies the potential of AI to enrich storytelling and engage audiences, Coca-Cola's experience highlights the pitfalls of relying heavily on technology without adequately addressing the human elements that foster emotional connections. As brands continue to explore AI's capabilities, these cases serve as instructive paradigms for integrating technological advancements with the intrinsic human touch that underpins effective advertising.

Cinema and AI

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) in cinematic productions has also ushered in a new era of creative experimentation, exemplified by films such as *Sunspring* (2016) and *The Last Screenwriter* (2024). These works not only showcase the potential of AI in scriptwriting but also provoke discourse on the intersection of technology and human creativity.

Sunspring, an experimental science fiction short film, emerged from the collaboration between director Oscar Sharp and AI researcher Ross Goodwin (Sugiarto & Widiastuti, 2021; Danesi, 2024). For the Sci-Fi London film festival's 48-Hour Film Challenge, they developed an AI system named Benjamin, a recurrent neural network trained on a corpus of science fiction screenplays. Benjamin generated a script replete with unconventional dialogue and surreal narrative elements. The actors Thomas Middleditch, Elisabeth Grey, and Humphrey Ker brought this script to life, navigating its abstruse and idiosyncratic language. The resulting film is a testament to early AI's nascent role in creative writing, producing content that is both intriguing and disjointed, reflecting the algorithm's assimilation of its training data. Today, however, advancements in large language models have made it possible to generate coherent and contextually consistent screenplays for film production, thereby

challenging traditional conceptions of authorship and creativity by positioning AI not merely as a tool but as a potential co-creator in the narrative process (Cake, 2025; Ching & Mothi, 2025).

In a more recent endeavor, *The Last Screenwriter*, directed by Swiss filmmaker Peter Luisi, represents one of the pioneering feature-length films scripted entirely by AI, specifically ChatGPT 4.0 (Priestley, 2024; Sheepshanks, 2024). The narrative delves into the existential quandaries of Jack, a seasoned screenwriter who confronts an AI scriptwriting system capable of matching, and potentially surpassing, his own abilities. This metafictional premise mirrors the film's creation process, wherein Luisi provided initial prompts to ChatGPT, guiding the AI to develop characters, plot structures, and dialogues. The film's production and impending release have ignited debates regarding the implications of AI in the creative industries, underscoring both the innovative possibilities and the apprehensions surrounding technological encroachment into traditionally human domains and for that reason the film's premiere was cancelled by The Prince Charles Cinema in London (Dams, 2024; Pulver, 2024; Sheepshanks, 2024).

Television and AI

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into television production has likewise engendered innovative methodologies, exemplified by projects such as *Nothing, Forever* and Fable Studio's *Showrunner*.

Nothing, Forever, conceived by Mismatch Media, is an AI-generated, procedurally produced animated sitcom that commenced streaming on Twitch in December 2022 (Danesi, 2024; Krysztoforska & Kenny, 2024). Drawing inspiration from the 1990s sitcom *Seinfeld*, the show features characters engaging in dialogues synthesized by AI models, including OpenAI's GPT-3, with visual elements rendered in a retro, low-resolution aesthetic. The narrative unfolds continuously, with scripts and interactions generated in real-time, resulting in a surreal and often nonsensical viewing experience. Despite, or perhaps because of, its avant-garde nature, the show garnered a dedicated viewership. However, in February 2023, the stream was temporarily suspended due to the generation of inappropriate content, highlighting the challenges inherent in moderating AI-driven media. *Nothing, Forever* was suspended from Twitch after the AI-generated character Larry Feinberg delivered homophobic and transphobic remarks during a stand-up segment, violating the platform's community guidelines (Rosenblatt, 2023; Oladipo, 2023; Prahl, Shanice, & Justina, 2024).

In a parallel vein, in 2023 Fable Studio introduced *Showrunner*, an AI-driven platform designed to autonomously create episodic content (Binns, 2024; Frías, 2024). Leveraging their proprietary model, SHOW-1, the system is capable of scripting, directing, animating, and voicing entire episodes with minimal human intervention. As a demonstration of its capabilities, Fable Studio produced unauthorized episodes of *South Park*, wherein the AI synthesized narratives, dialogues, and visuals that emulated the original show's distinctive style. This endeavor not only showcased the potential of AI in content creation but also sparked discourse regarding intellectual property rights and the ethical implications of replicating established creative works

without the consent of any creators (Heritage, 2024; Perez, 2023).

The emergence of *Nothing, Forever* and *Showrunner* represents a paradigmatic shift in television production that can be analyzed through the lens of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, wherein simulations no longer mirror the real but generate their own autonomous logic. These AI-generated series exemplify the fourth stage of the simulacrum, in which media ceases to refer to any external referent; be it lived experience, human intention, or cultural memory—and instead operates within a closed system of algorithmically derived signifiers. *Nothing, Forever* does not parody *Seinfeld* in the traditional sense; rather, it reassembles the tropes, rhythms, and visual codes of 1990s sitcoms into a perpetually self-replicating feedback loop devoid of narrative teleology. Similarly, *Showrunner*'s production of unauthorized *South Park* episodes underscores a disquieting collapse of authorship and originality, as the system generates content that simulates not only aesthetic form but also the sociocultural function of the original series. In both cases, AI is not merely augmenting creative labor; it is enacting a form of post-human authorship in which cultural production is driven by data-driven pattern recognition rather than expressive intent, resulting in televisual artifacts that exist as pure simulacra: uncanny, familiar, and untethered from origin.

The AI Simulacrum

The Coca-Cola and Nike campaigns exemplify Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, wherein representations become detached from reality, evolving into entities that simulate experiences without direct referents. Coca-Cola's AI-generated Christmas advertisement reimagines its classic 1995 *Holidays Are Coming* campaign by employing artificial intelligence to recreate festive scenes. This results in a representation that, while visually reminiscent of the original, lacks the authentic human elements, thereby producing a simulacrum that replaces the real with a manufactured imitation. Similarly, *Nike's Never Done Evolving* campaign utilizes AI and machine learning to simulate a match between the 1999 and 2017 versions of Serena Williams. By analyzing archival footage to model playing styles and decision-making processes, the campaign generates a virtual encounter that never occurred, creating a hyperreal scenario where the simulation becomes as engaging as, or perhaps more than, actual events. In both instances, the brands leverage advanced technologies to craft experiences that, while compelling, underscore the transition from representations grounded in reality to simulations that stand independently, epitomizing Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum.

Examined through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, the AI-scripted films *Sunspring* and *The Last Screenwriter* epitomize the transition from representations that reflect reality to simulations that supplant it. In *Sunspring*, the script generated by the AI named Benjamin produces a narrative that, while syntactically coherent, is semantically disjointed, resulting in a film that mirrors the form of traditional cinema but lacks a grounding in authentic human experience. Similarly, *The Last Screenwriter* presents a scenario where an AI not only emulates but surpasses human screenwriting abilities, blurring the boundary between creator

and creation. These films serve as exemplary of Baudrillard's third order of simulacra, wherein signs no longer refer to a real entity but exist as self-contained realities, leading audiences into a hyperreal domain where the distinction between the artificial and the authentic becomes indistinguishable.

The integration of artificial intelligence into television production, as exemplified by *Nothing, Forever* and Fable Studio's *Showrunner*, can be understood as a progression toward the hyperreal, a state in which representations no longer refer to any external reality but instead generate self-referential meanings. It is the fourth stage of the image, culminating in the simulacrum, where the distinction between the real and the representation collapses entirely. AI-generated content such as *Nothing, Forever*, which mimics the structure and aesthetic of a 1990s sitcom without any original referent or human authorial intention, exemplifies this final stage. Similarly, *Showrunner*'s creation of unauthorized *South Park* episodes simulates not only the visual and narrative conventions of the source material but also its cultural function, effectively substituting the real with a technically sophisticated imitation. These examples demonstrate a media landscape increasingly dominated by simulations that are not only detached from reality but may also supplant it, raising questions about authorship, authenticity, and the erosion of the real in favor of algorithmically constructed fictions.

This algorithmic saturation of television production not only reflects but actively reconfigures the ontological substrate of contemporary media culture. Projects like *Nothing, Forever* and *Showrunner* embody a telos of machinic creativity, wherein narrative coherence and aesthetic form are no longer anchored in human intentionality but arise from recursive data loops and generative protocols. These systems do not merely imitate televisual norms; they instantiate a mode of cultural production in which repetition supplants reference, and innovation emerges from stochastic processes rather than artistic deliberation. The result is a televisual ecology wherein content proliferates autopoietically, produced by machines for audiences acclimated to the synthetic, thus engendering a feedback loop that normalizes the hyperreal as the dominant mode of representation. In such a milieu, questions of authorship and originality become not only obsolete but perhaps unintelligible, displaced by algorithmic agency and the banality of infinite recombinatory variation.

To respond effectively to the rise of generative AI in media production, advancing media literacy is essential—particularly through critical engagement with real-world case studies that reveal both common patterns and notable differences. Across all selected examples—*Coca-Cola's AI Christmas campaign*, *Nike's Never Done Evolving*, *Sunspring*, *The Last Screenwriter*, *Nothing, Forever*, and *Showrunner*— a shared pattern emerges: the use of AI to simulate human creativity and generate content that mimics familiar styles, emotions, or formats. These simulations often blur the line between reality and fabrication, challenging audiences to reconsider what constitutes authenticity and authorship. However, the cases also differ significantly in intent and reception. Nike's campaign, for instance, was praised for using AI to enhance narrative depth and celebrate athletic progression, whereas Coca-Cola's ad was criticized for lacking emotional impact. Similarly, *Sunspring* and *The Last Screenwriter* experiment with AI as a narrative engine, yet while one is intentionally surreal, the other aims for coherence, sparking controversy about creative legitimacy.

Television cases like *Nothing, Forever* and *Showrunner* push these dynamics further, producing fully automated content that questions the very need for human input.

In a curious twist of fate, as artificial intelligence endeavors to emulate human creativity, we find ourselves in a paradox where the simulacra it produces compel us to confront the authenticity of our own imaginative faculties. This conundrum invites reflection on whether the ascent of AI-generated art signifies a new epoch in the evolution of simulacra, one where the boundaries between human ingenuity and machine-generated imitation become increasingly nebulous.

Implications for Media Consumption and Cultural Production

The integration of generative artificial intelligence into media production carries significant implications for both media consumption and cultural production. As AI-generated content becomes more prevalent and increasingly indistinguishable from human-created media, traditional markers of authorship, originality, and authenticity are being redefined. This shift may lead to a growing normalization of synthetic media, where consumers interact with and respond emotionally to content that lacks a direct human origin.

From a consumption standpoint, audiences may find it increasingly difficult to differentiate between human-authored and machine-generated content. This could contribute to a more passive mode of media engagement, where critical awareness is diminished, and simulations are accepted at face value. Furthermore, recommendation algorithms and personalization systems powered by AI may reinforce existing preferences and behaviors, potentially leading to a homogenization of content and a narrowing of cultural exposure.

In terms of cultural production, the use of AI challenges the role of the creative professional. While generative technologies offer new tools and efficiencies, they also raise concerns about the displacement of creative labor and the devaluation of human artistic contribution. The production process may shift from one centered on expression and meaning-making to one driven by data optimization and predictive modeling. This reorientation has the potential to alter the foundational principles of cultural production, transforming it into a process shaped more by algorithmic logic than by human intent.

Beneath this transformation lies a deeper cultural recalibration, in which the metrics of value and success in media are increasingly dictated by algorithmic visibility rather than artistic merit or social resonance. The integration of generative AI does not merely automate aspects of media creation, it subtly reconfigures what is deemed worth creating in the first place. When predictive models anticipate audience preferences, cultural production risks becoming anticipatory rather than exploratory, privileging repetition over rupture. This raises a critical tension: while AI may democratize access to tools once reserved for specialists, it also introduces a logic of standardization that can suppress anomaly, experimentation, and dissent. In such a landscape, nuance, ambiguity, and cultural specificity may be sacrificed for legibility and engagement metrics, prompting the urgent question of how to retain a pluralistic and human-centered media ecology in the midst of proliferating simulations.

All the world is a stage, but increasingly, the actors are no longer human. As generative AI becomes more deeply embedded in media production, we are witnessing a profound shift in how stories are told, how culture is created, and how meaning is made. This transformation challenges not only our understanding of creativity and authorship but also our relationship with reality itself. I find it both thrilling and unsettling to consider that the simulations we now consume may soon shape our cultural imagination more than lived experience. In this moment, it is crucial that we do not merely marvel at the technological capabilities of these systems, but also critically examine their cultural, ethical, and societal consequences. The stage may be changing, but we still have the power to decide what kind of performance unfolds upon it.

Taken together, these developments reveal a profound synthesis between technological advancement and cultural transformation, wherein generative AI is not simply a tool but an agent reshaping the very structures of media creation and reception. The convergence of AI-driven production, audience personalization, and algorithmic evaluation produces a media ecosystem where simulations are both the product and the metric of success. As traditional boundaries between human creativity and machine-generated content dissolve, so too do the frameworks by which we interpret meaning, value, and authenticity. This integrated landscape demands a reevaluation of our critical engagement with media, not only to understand the implications of AI-authored culture, but to actively shape its trajectory in ways that preserve diversity, uphold artistic integrity, and maintain a meaningful connection to lived human experience.

Future Research

Future research ought to delve into the aesthetic dimensions of generative artificial intelligence within media production, examining not only how GAI replicates but how it transforms established visual and narrative conventions. As machines increasingly generate content that is stylistically coherent yet ontologically untethered, the question arises: can we identify a distinctive AI aesthetic, and if so, how does it affect our cultural understanding of beauty, creativity, and authorship? The study of ludic structures in interactive media, long central to digital aesthetics, may offer a productive lens here, particularly in analyzing how AI scripts and simulates user responses within adaptive storytelling environments. This has consequences for the interplay between GAI and mythopoeic structures in contemporary storytelling. Drawing on semiotic and narratological frameworks, researchers could investigate whether AI-generated narratives unconsciously echo archetypal patterns or instead introduce wholly novel mythologies born of algorithmic abstraction. This line of thought is particularly salient in understanding how simulacra evolve beyond imitation, constructing hyperrealities that embed themselves into collective memory and identity.

This means it is necessary that future research should indeed interrogate the socio-ethical infrastructures that frame the deployment of GAI in creative industries. Who has access to these tools, and whose voices are being simulated, omitted, or overwritten? A critical techno-cultural analysis may be needed in order to map the

power relations embedded in AI-generated media, exploring issues such as algorithmic bias, and the commodification of synthetic identity. Drawing on critical theory and digital humanities perspectives.

Standing at the edge of a synthetic media age, one feels an urgent need to address the ethical challenges AI-generated television presents. Future research must therefore also examine issues of authorship, consent, and creative ownership, as algorithms increasingly replicate styles and narratives without input from original creators. With biases embedded in training data and authorship obscured, questions of trust, accountability, and fairness grow more pressing. An ethically grounded framework is essential to guide AI's role in cultural production.

Conclusion

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence into creative industries presents both significant opportunities and complex challenges, as it reshapes the cultural landscape of media production and consumption. This article has explored how generative AI contributes to the proliferation of simulacra by producing content that no longer references an underlying reality but instead creates self-contained simulations. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation, the analysis has demonstrated how AI-generated media can blur the distinction between the real and the artificial, particularly in cases where technological output replaces or mimics human creativity.

The examined cases, ranging from AI-powered advertisements by Coca-Cola and Nike to AI-scripted films such as *Sunspring* and *The Last Screenwriter*, and procedurally generated television content like *Nothing, Forever* and *Showrunner*, illustrate different stages of simulation. These examples show how AI is increasingly involved in cultural production, not only as a tool but as an autonomous agent capable of generating narratives, aesthetics, and experiences that function independently of human intention or authorship.

This development has significant implications for our understanding of authenticity, creativity, and meaning-making in the digital age. As AI technologies continue to evolve, it becomes increasingly important to question how we engage with synthetic media and to consider the broader cultural consequences of a media environment dominated by simulations. The integration of AI into cultural production requires coordinated efforts among scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to normalize its use in ways that uphold human values, encourage critical media literacy, and hopefully uphold the integrity of the real.

To respond effectively to the rise of generative AI in media production, a strong emphasis must be placed on advancing media literacy. Audiences need the tools to critically assess and interpret AI-generated content, recognizing the difference between human-authored and machine-produced media. This involves integrating media literacy education in order to foster analytical skills, ethical awareness, and an understanding of how algorithms shape what we see and consume. By equipping individuals to question the origin, purpose, and authenticity of digital content, media literacy can empower the public to navigate a landscape increasingly populated by

simulations, reinforcing critical thinking and safeguarding democratic engagement in an age of synthetic media.

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Money, Money, Money Might Not Be as Funny! The Fascist Potential of the "Old Money" Trend on Social Media: How the Modern Aestheticization of Neoliberalism Connects to Right-Wing Extremist Narratives

By Veronica Bezold[*]

Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor. (The Great Gatsby, p. 151)

Blue hydrangea, cold cash divine
Cashmere, cologne, and white sunshine
Red racing cars, sunset and vine
The kids were young and pretty
(Lana Del Rey, "Old Money")

#oldmoney has flooded social media since the early 2020s, with thousands of posts – videos, photos, memes, and AI-generated content. At first glance, these posts showcase luxury and wealth. However, they also reveal rigid classism, racism, and sexism. The concept of #oldmoney has transitioned into real life, with tutorials on "how to dress/look/behave old money" gaining popularity. While social media portrays old money as glamorous, it depicts new money as vulgar. Consequently, participants in the trend not only view themselves as superior to poor people (despite possibly belonging to a lower class) but also to other wealthy individuals. Thus, #oldmoney aligns with exclusionary right-wing extremist narratives. This study theoretically develops four arguments for why this is, using typical examples of #oldmoney: 1) focus on predetermined factors (e.g., "bloodline"), 2) glorification of "purity" connected to "being white," 3) propagation of "traditional" gender roles, and 4) hence, others who do not fulfill ARGUMENTS 1 to 3 are degraded. It aims to explore how the current online aestheticization of neoliberalism under #oldmoney facilitates the dissemination and normalization of right-wing extremist narratives on social media, utilizing a Marxist reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, a key pop cultural reference for #oldmoney.

Introduction

"There are only 5 rules… Drink french [sic!] Dress italian [sic!] Wear swiss [sic!] Drive german [sic!] Marry swedish [sic!]" (see Figures 1 and 2). Various versions of these "rules" circulate in digital space. Time and again, they are uploaded as peppy multimedia content, which is shared and liked by hundreds, sometimes thousands, of users on TikTok and other networks. While these orders may seem strange to people not "in the know"[1], others, especially young users, quickly grasp the mimetically[2]

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[1]Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*. The MIT Press, 2013: 173.

processed message: following these rules is promised to lead to wealth and success. This assumption is part of a trend that has had a firm hold on social media, especially TikTok, for years: *#oldmoney*.

Figures 1 and 2. This example shows one version of the "old money rules" circulating on social media. #oldmoney can be found in the caption. Figures 1 and 2 are part of the same video and have been separated for formatting reasons only; derived from TikTok

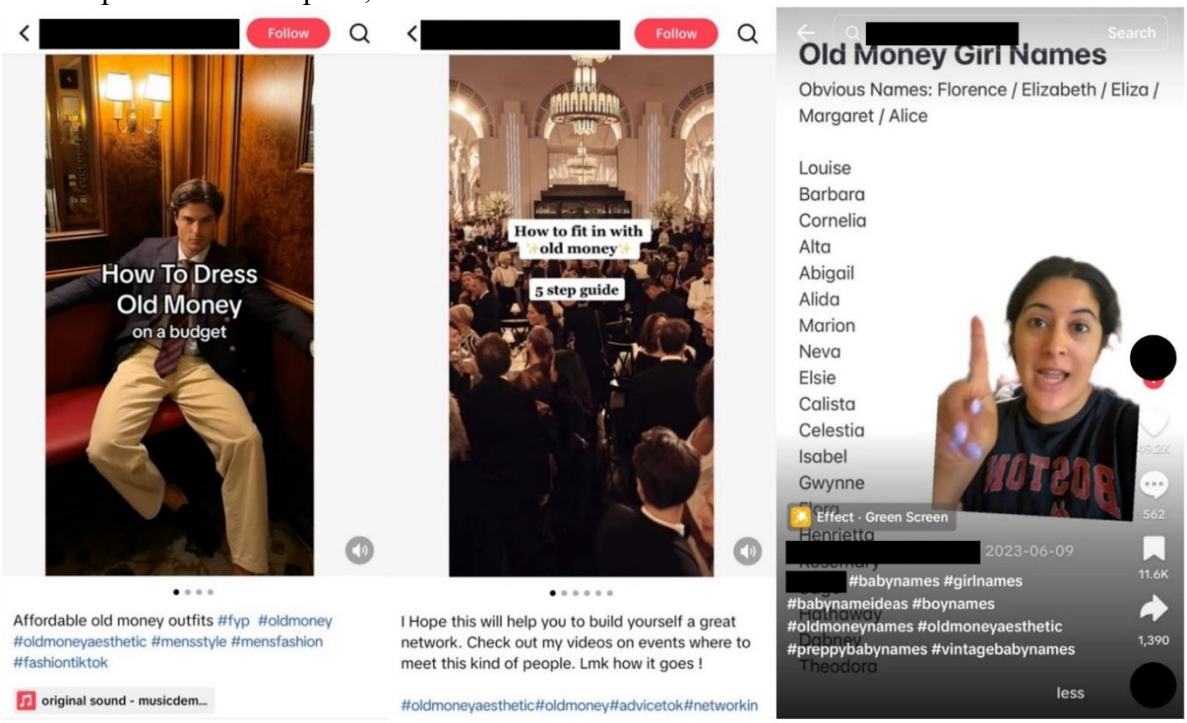
Source: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNddG5rHN/ [24.03.2025].

Countless posts, including videos, photos, memes, and AI-generated content, use the hashtag. They showcase individuals who conform to Western beauty ideals, dressed in stylish outfits, driving luxury vehicles, and residing in opulent mansions, presenting digital fantasies of extraordinary wealth. Certain songs, such as those by

[2]*Meme*/*mimetic* is understood according to: Bezold, Veronica and Knieper, Thomas. "Scrolling Through Cute Cats and Swastikas: On Defining Political Internet-Memes and Studying Mimetic Challenges for Today's Democracy." In *Bilder im Aufbruch: Herausforderungen der Bildwissenschaft*, edited by M. Lemmes; S. Packard and K. Sachs-Hombach. Köln, 2025.

Lana Del Rey, have become anthems for the *old money* fandom, providing soundtracks for numerous TikTok videos. Spotify even promotes an official "Old Money Mix"[3] inspired by the trend. The term "fandom" aptly describes users uploading such content, as *#oldmoney* posts glorify the extremely rich or, in Marxist terms, the *bourgeoisie*. Online tutorials (see Figure 3) assert that they offer pathways into the *old money* community by adopting perceived *old money* style and behaviors. Thus, *#oldmoney* has made its way from our screens into real life, shaping people's wardrobes and appearance worldwide – e.g., by avoiding specific colors in clothing[4] or by dying their hair "Old-money blonde"[5].

Figure 3. This figure illustrates three examples of "old money tutorials." The topics discussed in such videos are not limited to those presented. #oldmoney can be found in the captions below the posts; derived from TikTok



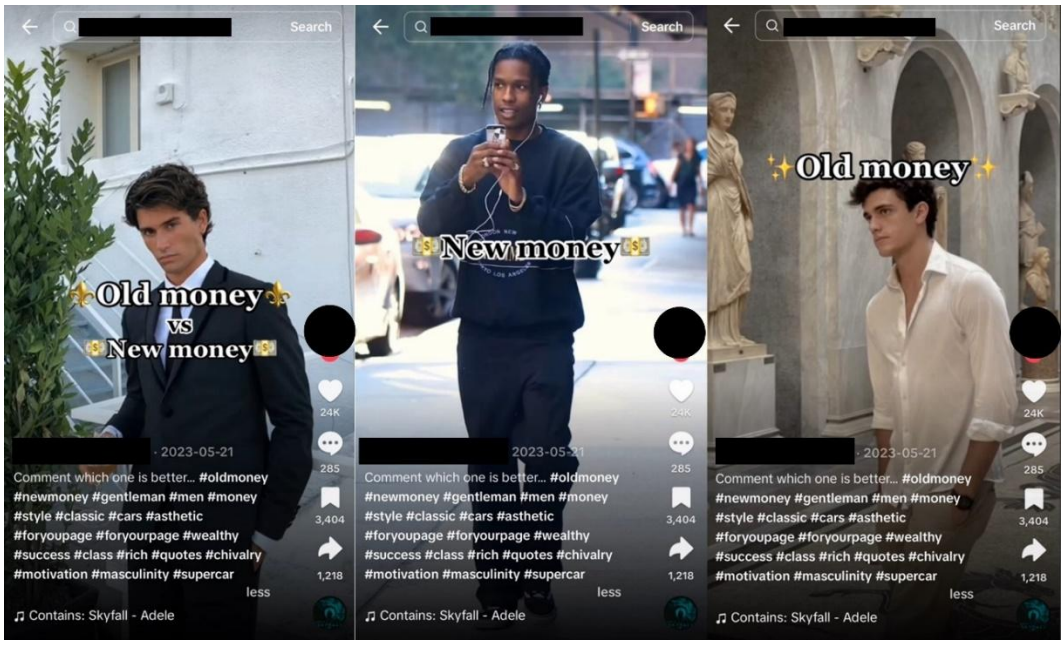
Sources: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNddGgNJ3/; https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdd7EdU2/; https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdRrd1rg/ [24.03.2025].

Soon, *#newmoney* emerged as the counterpart of *#oldmoney* (see Figure 3). On social media, *new money* individuals are often seen as "vulgar" for allegedly flaunting their newly acquired wealth. They are shown wearing bold street fashion and driving flashy sports cars, contrasting the "quiet luxury" of *old money*. Ironically, *#nomoney* rarely features in this trend; it often acts as a synonym for *#newmoney*, implying that only *old money* – meaning inherited wealth – is genuinely desirable. Users aspiring to

[3]Source: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1EIf5WqeslSRo3 [11.05.2025].
[4]González, Paloma. "Los colores que los millonarios nunca usan al vestir." *GQ México y Latinoamérica, 2023*.
[5]Forsberg, Josefin. "From 'apricot blonde' to 'pumpkin spice red': All the hair colour trends we want to try this autumn." *Vogue Scandinavia*, 2024.

be *old money* seek to outshine those with *no money*, despite potentially belonging to a lower social class themselves, and even aim to be superior to other wealthy (*new money*) individuals.

Figure 4. This figure presents one example of "Old Money vs. New Money"-videos on social media. The appearance of the people depicted, their clothing, and their manners are compared. #oldmoney can be found in the caption below the post; derived from TikTok



Source: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNddGuB8F/ [24.03.2025].

#oldmoney is a simple yet complex trend. It features rigid categories (*#oldmoney* vs. *#newmoney* vs. *#nomoney*) and consistent imagery and aesthetics, facilitating low-threshold participation, mainly on social media. However, the concepts of *old* and *new money* predate TikTok. From ancient Greeks and Gilded Age Americans to today's "tech bros" of Silicon Valley, all of them have carefully observed the *nouveau riche*, meaning newcomers to the moneyed elites[6]. This classification of various "sub-classes" of the wealthy carries ideological implications and raises questions about its (pop) cultural significance. The categories of *old* and *new money* gained prominence during the nineteenth century when industrialization altered social structures in Europe and the U.S.[7]. Exclusive elites shifted their entry criteria from the amount of wealth to generational history, as new riches threatened their closed circles[8]. This duality made its final and probably most famous leap into mainstream pop culture as depicted in F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel *The Great Gatsby* (TGG)[9]: Fitzgerald's main character

[6]Kreis, Reinhild. "New Wealth in the New World: The "Nouveau Riche," Temporality, and Social Order in the United States from the 1860s to the 1920s." *American Studies* 66, no. 2 (2021): 380. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag WINTER Gmbh.
[7]ibid.
[8]ibid.
[9]Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "The Great Gatsby". London: Penguin, 1926/2021.

Jay Gatsby – a former soldier coming from *no money* who is now, due to shady business deals, a member of the *new money* community – tries to win back the love of his life Daisy Buchanan who, in turn, belongs to *old money* circles. Baz Luhrmann's bold and controversial 2013 film adaptation grossed $350 million, reigniting Gatsby's popularity, leading Joseph Vogel to state: "The Great Gatsby resonates more in the Obama era than it ever did in the Jazz Age"[10]. Although every hype eventually fades, *#oldmoney* surged on social media, particularly on TikTok, in 2021, reviving aspirations for a Gatsby-like lifestyle. *#oldmoney* reflects Gen Z's interest in class, wealth, and power, which did not emerge from nowhere. It mirrors worldwide political and societal developments that often come along with democratic erosion. It is no coincidence that *#oldmoney* appeared and thrives in the age of modern right-wing populism and extremism.

This paper explains why this is by examining how this distorted, modern aestheticization of neoliberalism links to right-wing extremist narratives. It develops four theoretical arguments using empirical examples from TikTok. These arguments build on a Marxist reading of TGG, reasoned in the novel's particular significance in the context of pop cultural perceptions of *old money* and *new money*, which is reflected in numerous implicit or explicit references to TGG within the *#oldmoney* trend, warranting further attention. A Marxist perspective facilitates critical class analysis, essential in understanding the prevalent social class attribution central to the ancient yet current *old money versus new money* narrative.

Literature Review

The digital glorification of inherited wealth through the *#oldmoney* trend has not yet been studied academically, though the concepts of *old money* and *new money* (*nouveau riche*) have been analyzed across various fields. For instance, Hsueh and Zellweger (2025) examined six *old-money* family dynasties and their complex succession processes[11]. Val Burris (2000) challenged the idea that *old money* is more liberal than *new money*, finding it to be rather uniformly conservative[12]. Additionally, Fisher and van Wees explored the historical perspective of aristocracy, including references to *new money* in ancient times[13].

While these examples provide interesting and valuable ideas, the sociological and cultural discourses on *old money versus new money* are by far the most important ones for the scope of this paper. For instance, Philippa Carr et al. (2023) used social psychology to analyze media representations of wealthy heirs in popular programs about the "super rich," revealing how portrayals of their children employ meritocratic

[10]Vogel, Joseph. ""Civilization's Going to Pieces": The Great Gatsby, Identity, and Race, From the Jazz Age to the Obama Era." *The F. Scott. Fitzgerald Review* 13, no. 1 (2015): 29.
[11]Hsueh, Josh Wei-Jun and Zellweger, Thomas. *Old Money in the West: Succession Processes and the Persistence of Family Business Dynasties in the Western World.* Academy of Management Discoveries, 2025: 51.
[12]Burris, Val. "The Myth of Old Money Liberalism: The Politics of the Forbes 400 Richest Americans." *Social Problems* 47, no. 3 (2000): 360-378.
[13]Fisher, Nick and van Wees, Hans. *Aristocracy in Antiquity: Redefining Greek and Roman Elites*. Classical Press of Wales, 2015: 8.

arguments to legitimize wealth while downplaying inherited privilege[14]. Similarly, Jennifer Smith Maguire (2019) examined the role of civility in constructing the professional middle class through media's representation of the nouveaux riches[15]. She identifies a new Gilded Age of financialized capitalism, with the super-rich 0.1% pulling away from the rest of society[16]. These conditions challenge the professional middle classes' local identities and positions, fostering a transnational upper middle class identity based on civility[17]. Smith Maguire identified narratives that depict the nouveaux riches as either legitimate or illegitimate, rendering the upper-middle class readership legible to itself[18]. The undeserving "vulgarians" are stigmatized as representatives of larger outsider groups, against whom the professional middle class is juxtaposed[19], which is precisely what occurs under *#oldmoney*. Yet, new aesthetes were legitimated insofar as they reproduced the currency of established cultural capital, thereby reinforcing the identity of the professional middle class[20].

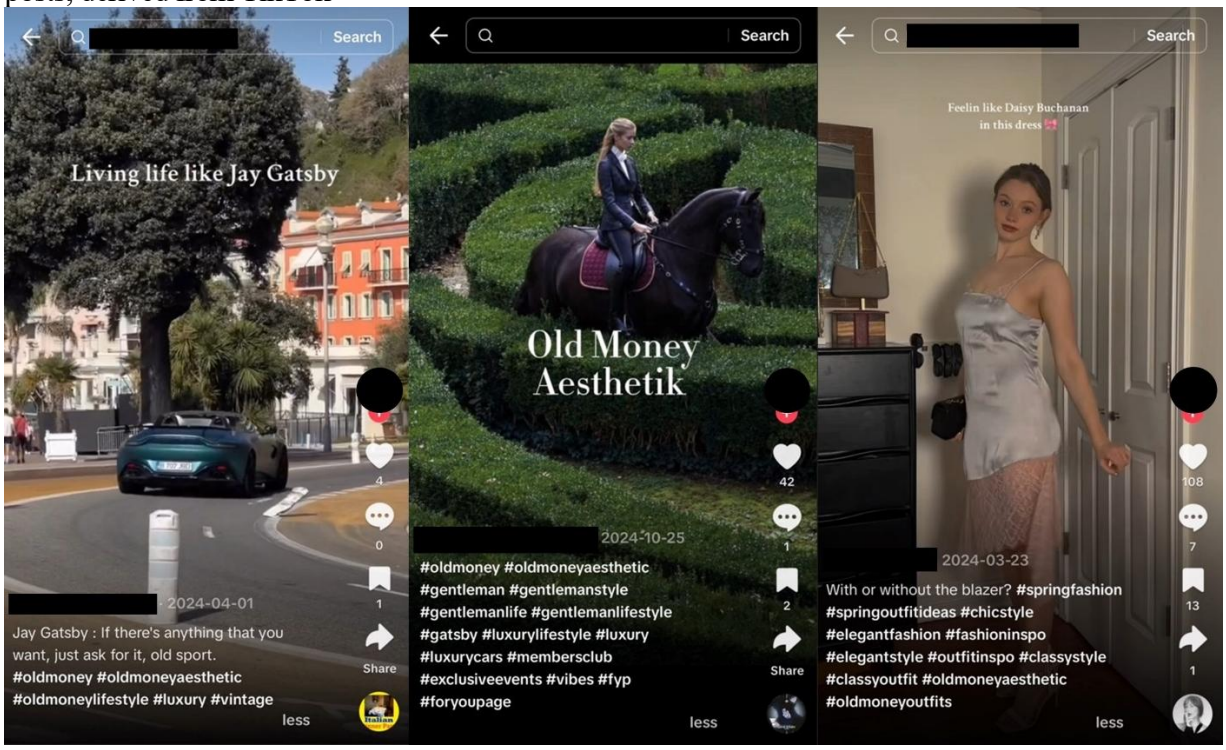
Exploring contrasts between *old money* and *new money*, along with today's media portrayals, inevitably leads to one particular pop cultural reference: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Although discussed later, two relevant examples illustrate the depiction of this duality in TGG: In 2011, Emma Johansson analyzed class identity in TGG, arguing that Jay Gatsby's dream of higher social status, resembling the American Dream, emerged before meeting Daisy[21]. Yet, after their encounter, his aspiration shifted towards acquiring great wealth to join *old money* circles[22]. Similarly, Hakar Taha Khalid (2023) examined wealth's role in relationships in TGG, concluding that characters employ different strategies – accumulating wealth, pursuing material goals, or leveraging financial inferiority – when forming connections[23]. These methods illustrate money's critical role in relationships in TGG[24]. Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film adaptation sparked an enduring hype around Gatsby, making references to the Gatsby world the most common pop culture benchmarks linked to *#oldmoney* (see Figure 5).

Therefore, this paper explores the societal implications and consequences of this trend by understanding and analyzing its primary source of pop cultural inspiration, the narration of TGG, and linking it to the actual patterns of *#oldmoney* usage on social media, particularly on TikTok, where the trend originated. In this process, four

[14]Carr, Philippa; Goodman, Simon; Jowett, Adam and Abell, Jackie. "Examining the role of television programmes in legitimising inherited wealth and privilege for the super-rich in a society that values meritocracy." *Social Semiotics* 34, no. 5 (2023): 931.
[15]Smith Maguire, Jennifer. "Media representations of the nouveaux riches and the cultural constitution of the global middle class." *Cultural Politics* 15, no. 1 (2019): 1-18.
[16]Smith Maguire, Jennifer. (2019): 13.
[17]ibid.
[18]ibid.
[19]ibid.
[20]ibid.
[21]Johansson, Emma. *Old Money versus New: Class Identity as a Motivational Force in The Great Gatsby*. Växjö; Kalmar: Linnaeus University, 2011: 29.
[22]ibid.
[23]Khalid, Hakar Taha. "New Money Versus Old Money; The Importance of Wealth in Building Relationships in The Great Gatsby." *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies* 10, no. 2 (2023): 136.
[24]ibid.

arguments are derived from the following literature review on 1) Marxist/class-critical interpretations of TGG and 2) links between neoliberal ideas and right-wing extremism. These arguments are then tested using typical examples of *#oldmoney* to illustrate how the trend connects to and thereby normalizes right-wing extremist narratives.

Figure 5. This figure showcases three examples of explicit references to The Great Gatsby under #oldmoney. TGG is particularly associated with the "Old Money Aesthetic". #oldmoney and #oldmoneyaesthetic can be found in the caption below the posts; derived from TikTok



Sources: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNddVKCss/; https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNddqFR4m/; https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNddqJWXr/ [24.03.2025].

Marxist Readings of the Great Gatsby

As a literary classic, *The Great Gatsby* (TGG) has been analyzed through various humanities and social sciences perspectives. The central conflict revolves around class and social ascent, leading to interpretations from Marxist and class-critical viewpoints. Karl Marx claims that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles[25], paralleling Fitzgerald's exploration of class in TGG. In this context, *#oldmoney* acts as a digital representation of *fetishism* in a Marxist sense[26],

[25]Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. *Das kommunistische Manifest.* Anaconda, 2021: 11.

[26]In this paper, *fetishism* is understood in line with to the original work by Karl Marx (MEW, 23, p. 85, 108, 169) as well as the interpretation of it by Stephan Grigat, who views *fetishism* as the objective and subjective mysticism of capitalized and state-organized society resulting from the simultaneously real and apparent reversal of social relations into seemingly natural things (Grigat, Stephan. "Der Marx'sche Fetischbegriff und seine Bedeutung für eine Kritik des Antisemitismus". *Fetisch als*

highlighting the contradiction between capitalism's inner essence and its perceived outer appearance[27]. This paper examines how this distorted, modern aestheticization of neoliberalism connects to right-wing extremist narratives from a Marxist perspective, viewing right-wing extremism as a product of capitalist crises, violent enforcement of social conditions by the ruling class, and ultimately false consciousness[28] about social reality. Theodor W. Adorno, also rooted in Marxist tradition, asserts that the foundations for modern fascist movements stem from the ongoing concentration of capital, fostering the potential for permanent declassification of previously bourgeois social strata, which seek to maintain their privileges[29]. These groups shift blame for their declassification away from its causes, directing it toward critics of the system in which they once held status[30]. Adorno's explanation serves as the theoretical premise of this paper.

A notable, concise Marxist analysis of TGG is by Mulghani et al. (2023), examining themes of exploitation and manipulation by the upper class. They emphasize the "lust for wealth and position" affecting all characters and the entire storyline[31]. In a Marxist sense, they assume that exploitation can only occur in "flawed capitalism," which is based on the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, who hold the means of production[32]. Mulghani et al. argue that applying class-critical Marxist theory to the fictional world of TGG helps explain social inequality and exploitation in real-life[33]. In TGG, exploitation extends beyond economic resources; all characters embody self-exploitation and deception[34]. They conclude, "The Great Gatsby speaks of the insignificance that lies at the very heart of glamour and deception signifying the Jazz Age. […] In this, power, wealth and position play a horrible role because the shimmering glam of supremacy blinded each and every character"[35].

Joseph Vogel (2015) offers an outstanding, more implicit yet indeed class-critical perspective on TGG, examining how the novel serves as a multimedia text in the Obama era and how the story resonates in remarkably familiar terms with contemporary issues. He argues that the story's impact stems from its intersectional exploration of identity[36]. This is evident in narrator Nick Carraway's contrasting views of two characters: "Tom Buchanan, who represents a more traditional ideal of white American masculinity: strong, wealthy, dominant […]; and Jay Gatsby, who

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heuristische Kategorie: Geschichte - Rezeption - Interpretation, edited by C. Antenhofer, 275-292. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2011: 277 f.).

[27]Marx, Karl. Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band. In: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (ed.): Werke, Band 23. Dietz Verlag, 1962: 85, 108, 169.

[28]Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich. Briefwechsel Januar 1852 bis März 1860. In: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (ed.): *Werke,* Band 39. Dietz Verlag, 1983: 97.

[29]Adorno, Theodor, W. *Aspekte des neuen Rechtsradikalismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019: 10.

[30]ibid.

[31]Mulghani, Maleeha Akhtar; Mushtaq, Tanzeela and Fatima, Asra. "Exploitation: A Marxist Analysis of The Great Gatsby by Fitzgerald." *International Research Journal of Management and Social Sciences* 4, no. 3 (2023): 115.

[32]Mulghani et al. (2023): 117.

[33]Mulghani et al. (2023): 118.

[34]ibid.

[35]Mulghani et al. (2023): 118f.

[36]Vogel, Joseph. ""Civilization's Going to Pieces": The Great Gatsby, Identity, and Race, From the Jazz Age to the Obama Era." *The F. Scott. Fitzgerald Review* 13, no. 1 (2015): 31.

represents difference, insufficient breeding, ambiguity, and mystery"[37]. Vogel contends that TGG draws connections between class, race, and power, rendering visible the myths, illusions, ideologies, and consequences of white supremacy[38]. Buchanan embodies privileged white capitalist patriarchy and is obsessed with racial infiltration, as the modern world presumably threatens his *WASP*[39] identity[40]. Identity, claims Vogel, was the number one issue of the Gatsby time[41]. He asserts that this discourse mirrors current racial discussions in America, emphasizing the 2012 presidential campaign as the most racially polarized since the Reagan era[42]. Barack Obama, as he notes, can be likened to Jay Gatsby, the personalization of *new money*, because his ascent to success has been challenging for many white Americans to accept[43]. Parallel to this, Tom Buchanan – as the personalization of privileged *old-money* white capitalist patriarchy in TGG – has one cause: "Preventing Daisy, the idealized white Southern belle, from marrying a racial alien, and thus defiling white civilization"[44]. Furthermore, Vogel offers a compelling interpretation of George Wilson, a less-recognized TGG character whose wife has an affair with Tom Buchanan. George admires men like Buchanan and still believes in the American Dream[45]. Instead of connecting with fellow laborers, the Wilsons aim to please Buchanan, thinking he will save them from poverty[46]. After his wife's death, George directs his anger away from the true sources of his loss (the Buchanans) to an easier target, Jay Gatsby[47]. Regarding the modern popularity of TGG, Vogel concludes: "The invisibility of white supremacy is unveiled. Beneath its seductive glamour, its naturalized veneer, its denials and justifications, it is exposed *not* as the victim of America's demise, but the culprit; not as a biological reality, but a value system, a convenient tool of exclusion, misdirected rage, and oppression"[48].

A few years after Joseph Vogel's essay on TGG in the Obama Era (2015), E. Fletcher McClellan and Kayla Gruber (2021) analyzed Jay Gatsby references in Trump-related stories catalogued on Google from June 2015 to the end of 2018. Supporters likened Trump to Gatsby as a "self-made man," while opponents compared him to Tom Buchanan, symbolizing white privilege[49]. Favorable comparisons were common in 2015 and 2016 but turned negative after Trump's election in November 2016 due to political rival narratives and his controversial behavior as president[50]. McClellan and Gruber note that such metaphors help people understand new

[37]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 31.
[38]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 32.
[39]WASP = White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.
[40]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 36.
[41]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 38.
[42]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 39.
[43]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 41.
[44]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 42.
[45]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 48.
[46]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 48f.
[47]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 50.
[48]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 51.
[49]McClellan, E. Fletcher and Gruber, Kayla. Conceptual Blending in Presidential Politics: How *The Great Gatsby* Explained Donald Trump, 2015-2018. *Popular Culture Studies Journal* 9, no. 2 (2021): 214.
[50]McClellan, E. Fletcher and Gruber, Kayla. (2021): 214f.

phenomena[51]. They outline three reasons why TGG serves as a central metaphor[52]: its appeal across social classes, timelessness, and its utility for elites to understand Trump's appeal to less-educated voters. Their findings highlight TGG's significance in political discourse today.

While the mentioned publications highlight TGG's overall importance, others analyze specific social themes, particularly racism and sexism, from a class-critical perspective. For instance, Peter Gregg Slater discusses ethnicity in TGG (1973) and argues that a heightened awareness of ethnic differences is a key element of the novel. Instead of allegations of Fitzgerald's racism or antisemitism, Slater examines ethnic consciousness, linking the story to its era. He notes that while Tom Buchanan loudly expresses ethnic rivalry, other characters, especially narrator Nick Carraway, also reflect on ethnic differences[53]. Slater suggests Carraway's awareness is paired with an implicit belief in *WASP* superiority[54], clear in various racist and antisemitic descriptions of characters he interacts with[55]. Slater claims these biases were prevalent among 1920s Americans, positioning TGG as a significant document of that decade[56]. A more recent publication by Shama Rangwala compares various adaptations of the "Gatsby figure," focusing on the implementation of racial themes[57]. Rangwala suggests that the Gatsby figure appears in narratives that may bear little resemblance to the plot of Fitzgerald's novel. However, all contend with how American myths of meritocracy and agency reinforce the oppression of capitalist white supremacy[58]. While the texts from the 1920s are explicit about racialized structures and institutional racism, the recent adaptations either depict Black people vilifying other Black people or involve the erasure and co-optation of Black culture altogether[59]. She concludes: "Indeed, it appears that the Gatsby figure will continue to re-emerge in various forms – reproducing the different manifestations of the policing of capitalism and whiteness – as long as the American nation exists"[60]. Additionally, sexism in TGG has been thoroughly explored. Affroni (2013) used feminist theory to identify women's oppression in the novel, such as women's exclusion from the marketplace and physical abuse[61]. According to the author, Fitzgerald describes the power and dominance of the patriarchal system through the character of Tom Buchanan, who attempts to "buy" women with his status and remains immune to moral values as a patriarch[62]. He argues that Jordan Baker is the only female character who escapes oppression[63]. Yuwen Zhu (2016) supports Affroni's

[51]McClellan, E. Fletcher and Gruber, Kayla. (2021): 201.
[52]McClellan, E. Fletcher and Gruber, Kayla. (2021): 204.
[53]Slater, Peter Gregg. "Ethnicity in The Great Gatsby." *Twentieth Century Literature* 19, no. 1 (1973): 54.
[54]Slater, Peter Gregg. (1973): 55.
[55]Slater, Peter Gregg. (1973): 55-59.
[56]Slater, Peter Gregg. (1973): 59.
[57]Rangwala, Shama. Race and Thickening of Mediation in Repetitions of The Great Gatsby. *English Studies in Canada* 43, no. 2 (2017): 91-116.
[58]Rangwala, Shama. (2017): 114.
[59]ibid.
[60]ibid.
[61]Affroni, "A. Analysis on the Issue of Women Oppression in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby." *LANTERN (Journal on English Language, Culture and Literature)* 2, no. 2 (2013): 3-5.
[62]Affroni, A. (2013): 5.
[63]Affroni, A. (2013): 7-9.

view by calling Jordan Baker "a representative of a new woman"[64]. Zhu analyzed the portrayal of Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson, as well as the narrator's prejudice against women, in Baz Luhrmann's film adaptation. He believes the negative depictions reflect men's prejudice and fear of women's rights in the early 20th century[65].

Several other studies focus on in-depth class-critical analysis of individual characters. Since *#oldmoney* refers to and glorifies *old money* elites, the Buchanans, as representatives of this elite, are of particular interest in this context. Alberto Lena (1998) argues that Tom Buchanan exemplifies a millionaire rooted in socially acceptable, inherited wealth, showcasing the power that comes with it[66]. He contrasts sharply with a self-made man. Lena states: "The concept of the self-made man lays emphasis on the fact that the millionaire is the product of the laws of natural selection"[67]. He believes Buchanan's support for racist ideologies arises from his inability to adapt to societal changes[68]. Thus, he interprets the novel not as a portrayal of the American Dream's decline but as a critique of individual attitudes toward wealth[69]. Morshedul Alam and Shamim Ahmad (2021) indirectly challenge Lena's view. They argue that Buchanan represents the upper class of 1920s capitalistic America, acting against those beneath him. His capitalist traits "contribute to the shattering of American society"[70]. They conclude that understanding these capitalistic logics is essential for critically examining the intertwined nature of society and the individual, as capitalism's materialistic ideas strip away human qualities[71].

While Tom Buchanan is clearly the antagonist of Jay Gatsby, the romantic hero, Daisy Buchanan's role, as Tom's wife and Gatsby's love interest, is debated among scholars. Leland S. Person, Jr. criticizes those maligning Daisy's character[72]. He argues that simplifying characters into Good Boy (Gatsby) and Bad Girl (Daisy) shows a critical double standard, undermining the novel's complexity. He views Daisy as a victim of a "male tendency to project a self-satisfying, yet ultimately dehumanizing, image on woman"[73]. Joan S. Korenman critiques Sheilah Graham's assertion that Ali MacGraw was unsuitable for Daisy Buchanan in a forthcoming Gatsby film due to her "darker appearance"[74]. Korenman argues this view is misguided, noting that Fitzgerald's descriptions of Daisy are inconsistent[75]. She explains that Daisy is linked to gold and

[64]Zhu, Yuwen. Misogyny Reflected in the Movie The Great Gatsby. *Cross-Cultural Communication* 12, no. 12 (2016): 97.
[65]Zhu, Yuwen. (2016): 98.
[66]Lena, Alberto. "Deceitful Traces of Power: An Analysis of the Decadence of Tom Buchanan in The Great Gatsby." Canadian Review of American Studies 28, no. 1 (1998): 20.
[67]Lena, Alberto. (1998): 21.
[68]Lena, Alberto. (1998): 32.
[69]Lena, Alberto. (1998): 37f.
[70]Alam, Morshedul and Ahmad, Shamim. Capitalism and collapse of humanity: A study of The Great Gatsby and Seize the Day. *IIUC Studies* 18, no. 1 (2021): 126.
[71]Alam, Morshedul and Ahmad, Shamim. (2021): 132.
[72]Person, Leland S. Jr. "Herstory" and Daisy Buchanan. *American Literature* 50, no. 2 (1978): 250.
[73]Person, Leland S. (1978): 257.
[74]Korenman, Joan S. ""Only Her Hairdresser…": Another Look at Daisy Buchanan." *American Literature* 46, no. 4 (1975): 574.
[75]Korenman, Joan S. (1975): 575.

white, suggesting purity and innocence, often associated with fair women[76]. Additionally, Korenman highlights that Daisy's traits align with fair-haired heroines from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, contrasting with the often "foreign blood" portrayal of "dark women" in literature at the time[77]. A. E. Elmore (1970) confirms the deliberate use of colors in TGG. Elmore links the constant ironic association of the Buchanans and their living space, East Egg, with white back to their obsession with being part of the "white race" which Tom Buchanan fears to "be utterly submerged"[78]. In contrast, the poor in the Valley of Ashes are described with gray[79]; West Egg, home to *new money* people like Jay Gatsby, is associated with rainbow colors[80]; Downtown New York is depicted as a "chameleon-like" place[81].

Neoliberalism and Right-Wing Extremism

These glorifications of economic power are woven into the narrative of TGG, especially concerning Jay Gatsby. He embodies the American Dream, "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere,"[82] who gains wealth through his desire to win back Daisy Buchanan. Essentially, the American Dream is a neoliberal idea suggesting that the state allows anyone to improve their status if they desire it enough. Post-World War II, this dream's implications, like home ownership through mortgage debt[83], spread globally, increasing the desire to climb the social ladder through hard work within capitalism. This belief leads to the degradation of low-socioeconomic status groups (low-SES), viewed as responsible for their suffering. In 2023, Mario Sainz Martínez and Gloria Jiménez-Moya noted that the (de)humanization of others is key in intergroup relations, also relevant in socioeconomic contexts[84]. Low-SES groups are often seen as less evolved and animalistic, while high-SES groups are viewed as more evolved yet lacking in other human traits, such as emotionality[85]. This categorization, according to Sainz Martínez and Jiménez-Moya, reflects social dominance orientation (SDO) and system justification beliefs, usually associated with conservative or right-wing views[86]. Their findings indicate that (de)humanization justifies socioeconomic

[76]Korenman, Joan S. (1975): 576.
[77]Korenman, Joan S. (1975): 577.
[78]Elmore, A. E. "Colors and Cosmos in "The Great Gatsby."" The Sewanee Review 78, no. 3 (1970): 428, 440.
[79]Elmore, A. E. (1970): 433.
[80]Elmore, A. E. (1970): 434.
[81]Elmore, A. E. (1970): 434.
[82]Fitzgerald, F. Scott. 1926/2012: 130.
[83]Hauhart, Robert C. "Exporting the American Dream. Global Implications." In *The Routledge Handbook on the American Dream*, edited by R. Hauhart; M. Sardoč, 245. Volume 1. Edition 1. New York: Routledge, 2021.
[84]Sainz Martínez, Mario and Jiménez-Moya, Gloria. "Group Dominance, System Justification, and Hostile Classism: The Ideological Roots of the Perceived Socioeconomic Humanity Gap That Upholds the Income Gap." *International Review of Social Psychology* 36. no. 7 (2023): 2.
[85]ibid.
[86]ibid.

differences, shaping views on poverty and wealth, and influencing support for social change policies[87]. This justification stems from neoliberal thought patterns.

Christoph Butterwegge, a notable German critic of neoliberalism as an enabler of right-wing extremism, identifies three ideological connections between liberal conservatism, right-wing extremism, and neo-fascism: the exclusionary misuse of "national identity"; criticism of the welfare state favoring personal responsibility, family, and *Volksgemeinschaft* [national community]; and the belief that Germany's economy could thrive through increased market competition[88]. While the third connection may be unique to Germany, the first two are universally applicable. Butterwegge highlights similarities between neoliberalism and right-wing extremism, asserting that the neoliberal model, which promotes minimal state regulation, displays authoritarian traits[89]. Both ideologies prioritize peak performance – whether of individuals or the *Volksgemeinschaft* – and glorify competition where the strong dominate the weak[90]. This promotes (social) selection, conflicting with the principle of equality[91]. Thus, neoliberal hegemony enables the acceptance of extremist views in mainstream society by endorsing nationalism[92] and Social Darwinism[93]. Herbert Schui et al. articulate this: "The legitimization of the strong, assertive, and successful, along with the concept of selection and a powerful state, is likely to attract the same minds drawn to fascism for similar reasons. In both cases, […] the struggle for survival and heroism apply, but the hero of the pure society of exchange is not pathetic. This hero is the calculating, righteous, and ambitious petty bourgeois"[94].

Arun Kundnani argues that neoliberalism even produces distinct racial oppression structures[95]. He suggests racial domination is intertwined with the neoliberal reconfiguration of social, political, cultural, and economic aspects[96]. Neo-racism[97] displaces the political conflicts generated by neoliberalism onto "the more comfortable terrain of clashes of culture"[98]. Race thus organizes boundaries between the "exploitable" and "unexploitable", the "free" and "unfree", and the "deserving" and

[87]Sainz Martínez, Mario and Jiménez-Moya, Gloria. (2023): 13.
[88]Butterwegge, Christoph. (2001) *Wohlfahrtsstaat im Wandel*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-97530-0, 2001: 86.
[89]Butterwegge, Christoph. "Marktradikalismus und Rechtsextremismus." In *Neoliberalismus – Analysen und Alternativen*, edited by C. Butterwegge, B. Lösch and R. Ptak, 205. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008.
[90]ibid.
[91]ibid.
[92]In this context, Butterwegge refers to *Standortnationalismus* [ger.; engl.: *(business enterprise) location nationalism*] (Butterwegge, Christoph. (2008): 208, 215).
[93]Butterwegge, Christoph. (2008): 208, 215.
[94]Schui, Herbert; Ptak, Ralf; Blankenburg, Stephanie; Bachmann, Günter and Kotzur, Dirk. *Wollt ihr den totalen Markt? Der Neoliberalismus und die extreme Rechte,* Knaur. 1997: 15; own translation.
[95]Kundnani, Arun. "The racial constitution of neoliberalism." *Race & Class* 63, no. 1 (2021): 52.
[96]ibid.
[97]Kudnani understands *neo-racism* as follows: "Neo-racism claims that all cultures have their particular, fixed nature; on the other hand, it holds up western culture – presented as open, enterprising, and individualistic – as a universal standard against which others are judged inadequate" (Kudnani, Arun. (2021): 62).
[98]Kundnani, Arun. (2021): 64.

"undeserving"[99]. This racial hierarchy in global labor relations is violently upheld by neoliberal states, fostering the acceptance of racially framed explanations of social and political relations[100]. Neoliberalism intensifies differentiation by placing competition at the center of its political economy: "The market game has to punish its 'losers'", leading to success and failure being interpreted as judgments not just on the individual but on groups marked by their shared culture understood in neo-racist terms[101]. Kudnani states that the recent electoral successes of racist politicians and parties are not antagonistic to neoliberalism but the making of a racial ordering perpetuated by neoliberalism[102]. Stephan Pühringer and Walter Otto Ötsch applied Cas Mudde's definition[103] to analyze Trump's populism and highlight conceptual analogies to neoliberal or, more precisely, market-fundamental reasoning[104]. They identified four core attributes[105] of populist reasoning that align with arguments of US and European right-wing populists and the founders of market fundamentalism[106]. They suggest that demagogic and market-fundamental reasoning reinforce each other or serve as gateways for one another, facilitating an interplay observed in various campaigns[107]. Both concepts are noted to contain illiberal elements, posing a significant threat to democracy in the US and Europe by potentially leading to an authoritarian political and economic order[108]. Pühringer and Ötsch briefly reference the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD)[109], while Havertz specifically examines the AfD's *ordoliberalism*[110], a form of neoliberalism. He argues that the AfD seeks to radicalize the neoliberal agenda rather than abandon it, marking an authoritarian turn of neoliberalism[111]. The party aims to create a strong state that intervenes less, which seems paradoxical but serves to deepen their influence in society to drive economic growth[112]. Havertz contends that ordoliberalism is the ideal vehicle for a right-wing radical party to

[99]ibid.
[100]Kundnani, Arun. (2021): 53.
[101]Kundnani, Arun. (2021): 64.
[102]Kundnani, Arun. (2021): 66.
[103]Mudde, Cas. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 543.
[104]Pühringer, Stephan and Ötsch, Walter. Neoliberalism and right-wing populism: Conceptual analogies, *Working Paper Serie*, No. Ök-36 (2017): 1.
[105]Dually divided system; homogeneity of the parts; antagonistic forces; polysemy of the concept (Pühringer, Stephan and Ötsch, Walter Otto. (2017): 7).
[106]Pühringer, Stephan and Ötsch, Walter Otto. (2017): 1, 7.
[107]Pühringer, Stephan and Ötsch, Walter Otto. (2017): 8.
[108]ibid.
[109]ibid.
[110]Havertz understands *ordoliberalism* as follows: „The programme of the party deviates from ordinary neoliberalism where it asserts the need for a regulatory framework of the economy, the centrepiece of which would be a competitive order. This claim is based on the ordoliberal approach of the Freiburg School the main thinkers of which – Walter Eucken, Wilhelm Röpke, Alexander Rüstow, Franz Böhm and Alfred Müller-Armack – began to develop their economic concepts and theories at the end of the 1920s/beginning of the 1930s. The ordoliberals thought that if the forces of the market were left to play out unregulated, they would result in the concentration of private power in monopolies and oligopolies that could be used to undermine competition and distort the price mechanism. In the ordoliberal conception, a competitive order is supposed to prevent competition from turning against itself" (Havertz, Ralf. Right-Wing Populism and Neoliberalism in Germany: The AfD´s Embrace of Ordoliberalism. *New Political Economy* 24, no. 1 (2018): 2.)
[111]ibid.
[112]ibid.

amplify the authoritarian aspect of neoliberalism without overt authoritarianism[113]. The AfD aims to implement an authoritarian agenda that institutionalizes social inequality as a core societal principle[114], associating economic disparity with divisions of nation, race, religion, and culture[115]. Thus, ordoliberalism legitimizes resulting disparities[116]. This adoption of ordoliberal principles by right-wing populists may radicalize the neoliberal order[117].

Methodology, Arguments, and Materials

The recent, seemingly contradictory admiration for achieving "true," inherited, *old-money* wealth through the adoption of particular neoliberal habits and aesthetics promoted by *#oldmoney* is directly tied to exclusionary, right-wing extremist narratives. This correlation stems from four reasons derived from the literature review on Marxist interpretations of *The Great Gatsby* (TGG), which serves as a primary pop cultural inspiration for the trend, as well as the ideological connections between neoliberalism and right-wing extremism:

ARGUMENT 1: Focus on predetermined factors (e.g., "bloodline")

Striving to acquire or protect inherited wealth inevitably results in the idealization of factors like one's own or someone else's lineage. As previously noted, this is linked to ideas of nationalism and Social Darwinism, suggesting a supposed natural selection of wealth.

ARGUMENT 2: Glorification of "purity" connected to "being white"

Connected to *ARGUMENT 1*, *#oldmoney* promotes a flawed idealization of an alleged *old-money* purity concept. This is particularly evident in the reactionary portrayal of presumed *old-money* women through the hashtag, thoughtlessly echoing F. Scott Fitzgerald's (and Baz Luhrmann's) depiction of Daisy Buchanan.

ARGUMENT 3: Propagation of "traditional" gender roles

As shown in the literature review, the adoption of neoliberal ideas by right-wing players includes, among other things, criticism of the welfare state, an emphasis on personal responsibility, family, and *Volksgemeinschaft*. Specifically, the emphasis on allegedly "traditional" family values and the aim to uphold the *Volksgemeinschaft* inherently prioritizes the preservation of one's own nation. Consequently, this fosters a reactionary encouragement of "traditional" gender roles, a theme that is also evident under *#oldmoney*.

[113]ibid.
[114]Havertz, Ralf. (2018): 3.
[115]Havertz, Ralf. (2018): 15.
[116]ibid.
[117]ibid.

ARGUMENT 4: Hence, others who do not fulfill ARGUMENTS 1 to 3 are degraded

#oldmoney categorizes individuals based on social worth, which is determined by the type and amount of wealth they hold. This aligns with the neoliberal distinctions between, for example, the "deserving" and "undeserving." Since *#oldmoney* at its core glorifies inherited wealth, it inherently degrades anyone who does not possess it or who, at the very least, does not align with what is promoted and perceived as *old money* values.

These arguments are now elaborated using typical empirical examples of *#oldmoney* posts sourced from TikTok, where the trend originated, during March and April 2025[118]. This study employs a hermeneutic approach, suggesting that internet trends like *#oldmoney* can only be understood in their broader social and cultural context. A dynamic interaction among individual components, specifically chosen examples, underlying core narratives, and mechanisms of social media trends, was considered. Findings were continually checked using both primary and secondary literature. Additionally, insights from political science linking neoliberalism to right-wing extremism were included. To protect privacy, screenshots were anonymized by blurring usernames and profile images[119].

Results

ARGUMENT 1: Focus on predetermined factors (e.g., "bloodline")

"Blood means everything in this family" (see Figure 6). This is how TikTok users characterize the "Burberry Family," a subtype of *#oldmoneyfamily*. The glorification of heritage and bloodline is inherent to the glorification of the concept of *old money*. This is due to two reasons.

[118]This does not mean that the posts were uploaded at this time, but only that they were saved and analyzed for this study during this period.
[119]Since only publicly available posts were included, the persons depicted were not anonymized.

Figure 6. This figure shows an example of the explicit glorification of "old money blood". "Burberry Family" refers to the fashion brand Burberry, which is often associated with "old money fashion". #oldmoneyaesthetic, #oldmoneyfamily, and #bloodline can be found in the caption below the post; derived from TikTok

Source: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdRMc9p4/ [24.03.2025].

1) What distinguishes old money from new money (or no money), and old money cannot exist as an idea without that (unspoken) differentiation, is the fact that old-money wealth cannot be earned – it must be inherited.

Using a Marxist perspective on TGG, both Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan belong to the same social class: the upper class, or bourgeoisie. The only distinction is not the amount of wealth they possess but rather the source of that wealth. Gatsby's money is earned, albeit from dubious deals, while Buchanan's is inherited over generations. As Alberto Lena states, Buchanan exemplifies the opposite of a self-made man, suggesting he is a product of natural selection[120]. This implies that *new money*, "self-made" individuals like Gatsby, manipulate this predetermined assortment, leading to their perception as outsiders within the *old money* group, which is ultimately defined by lineage. An assumption that aligns with Joseph Vogel's juxtaposition of Buchanan and Gatsby: "Tom Buchanan, who represents a more traditional ideal of white American masculinity: strong, wealthy, dominant […]; and Jay Gatsby, who represents difference, insufficient breeding, ambiguity, and

[120]Lena, Alberto. (1998): 21.

mystery"[121]. The exclusion of *new-money* individuals – using mechanisms similar to other forms of human degradation, such as racism, sexism, or antisemitism – can be viewed as a coping strategy for addressing the capitalist mystification of acquired versus inherited capital. Jennifer Maguire argues that the undeserving "vulgarians" symbolize larger outsider groups, contrasted with *old money* in-groups[122]. However, new aesthetes gain legitimacy by reproducing established cultural capital, reinforcing the identity of the professional middle class[123]. Accordingly, this paper asserts that *#oldmoney* requires the concept of *#newmoney* to enhance its sense of belonging as an exclusive ingroup: an ingroup that considers itself not only better than the working class (*#nomoney*), but also superior to other wealthy individuals, specifically those with *new money*. Just as it was during the Gilded Age, this distinction has become relevant again in our era of wealthy "tech bros," rich influencers, and crypto millionaires. These new kinds of "Nobody from Nowhere"[124] -people threaten the social order of *old money* wealthiness, which means their self-justification and identity of natural selection are under attack and, therefore, must be protected. Not only are their once-closed communities "invaded" by these new wealthy individuals, but the "invaders" often made their fortunes through means (e.g., crypto, social media, or digital products) that carry an air of mystique or even a questionable reputation. This is because *old money* individuals, or anyone unfamiliar with these technologies, either do not understand them or do not take them seriously. Ultimately, this results in a defensive reaction against *new money* people, which, as *#oldmoney* shows, surprisingly also resonates with individuals from lower classes. Possible reasons for this will be discussed later.

2) Glorifying means legitimizing and protecting old money. This inevitably involves a fear that old-money bloodlines could be tainted or go extinct.

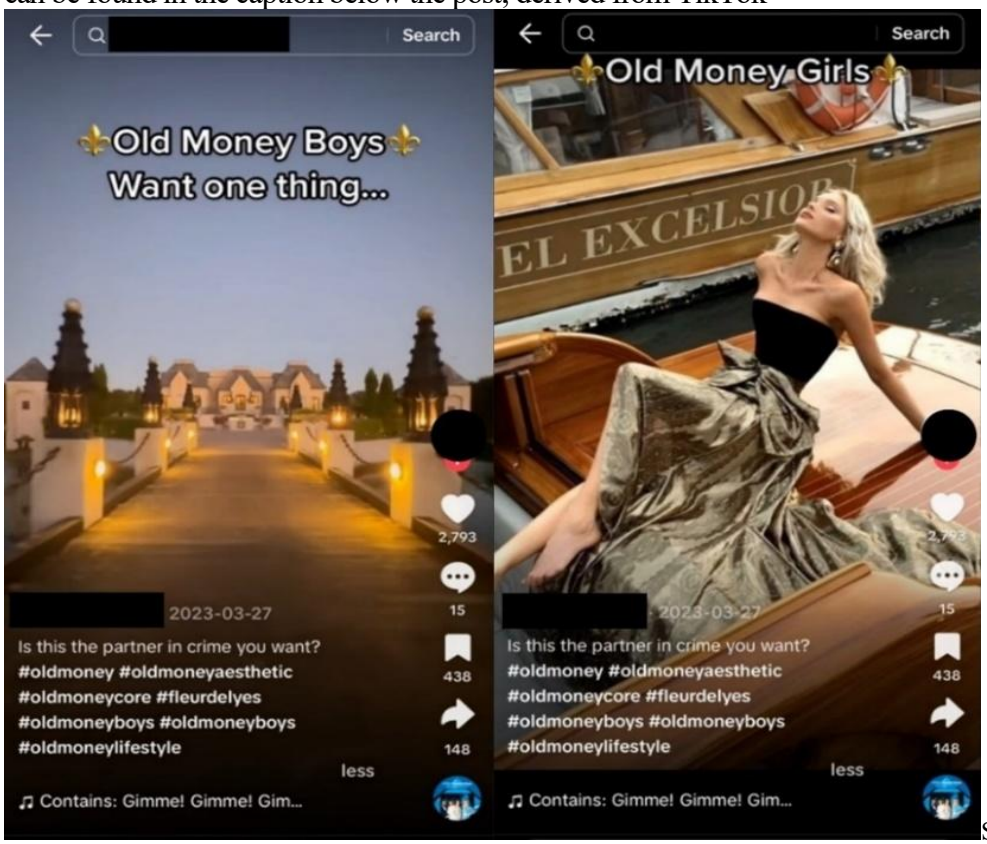
Tom Buchanan, the symbol of *old money* in TGG, is viewed by Joseph Vogel as a representation of privileged white capitalist patriarchy, fixated on "racial infiltration"[125]. Vogel asserts that his only goal is to stop Daisy, the idealized white Southern belle, from marrying Jay Gatsby, thus preventing the corruption of white civilization[126]. Whether Buchanan considers Gatsby an actual racial outsider is debatable, as Gatsby's ethnic background is widely discussed[127]. Buchanan may see Gatsby as an invader purely from a defensive stance (see *ARGUMENT 1*). Ultimately, he seeks to protect his and Daisy's *old-money* lineage from foreign influence, whether racial or economic.

Figure 7 illustrates that the preservation of traditional wealth, characterized by *old money* only marrying within its circle, is a key aspect of the *#oldmoney* trend on TikTok. Instead of questioning the traditions that preserve bloodlines for wealth accumulation, TikTok users glorify these customs, suggesting an implicit justification

[121]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 31.
[122]Smith Maguire, Jennifer. (2019): 13.
[123]ibid.
[124]Fitzgerald, F. Scott. (1926/2012): 130.
[125]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 36.
[126]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 42.
[127]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 42f.

for the fear of *old-money* blood being corrupted. This glorification often involves explicit racism. *#oldmoney* employs racist narratives like those discussed by Shama Rangwala about adaptations of the Gatsby figure: she argues that the Gatsby figure appears in various narratives that differ from Fitzgerald's novel[128]. Nonetheless, all explore how American myths of meritocracy and agency reinforce capitalist white supremacy[129]. In line with Rangwala's observations on contemporary portrayals of the Gatsby figure[130], numerous *#oldmoney* posts not only overlook but also undermine Black culture: White individuals portray *old money* as authentic wealth, while People of Color often represent its opposites, *new money* or *no money* (see Figure 4). In fashion, *#oldmoney* promotes traditionally white upper-class styles as the desirable *old-money* look, whereas Black Hip Hop culture often symbolizes *new-money* or *no-money* styles considered undesirable or cheap. This illustrates how *#oldmoney* both implicitly and explicitly conveys an assumed superiority of WASP individuals.

Figure 7. This figure shows one example of the implicit glorification of traditions that preserve bloodlines for wealth accumulation. TikTok users thereby reproduce and justify the fear of old-money blood being corrupted. #oldmoney and #oldmoneyaesthetic can be found in the caption below the post; derived from TikTok



Source: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdRNP9V5/ [24.03.2025].

[128]Rangwala, Shama. (2017): 114.
[129]ibid.
[130]ibid.

Joseph Vogel argues that during the Obama era, Buchanan-esque rhetoric revived, evident in conservative panic over "illegal aliens," concerns about diminishing white voting power, and racially charged views of "makers" versus "takers"[131]. He claims the 2012 presidential campaign was the most racially polarized since Reagan[132]. From a 2025 perspective, with Donald Trump re-elected and global fascism rising, the 2012 campaign seems relatively harmless. Social media discourse logically adapts to the reactionary, populist, and extremist global shifts. As Peter Gregg Slater noted, the depicted biases in TGG were common among Americans in the 1920s, marking it as a significant document of that decade[133]. Likewise, contributions to *#oldmoney* and the broader trend can be seen as critical digital artifacts of our decade, as they reflect changes in societal discourse along with its racist implications. As Alberto Lena states about Tom Buchanan, sympathy for racist ideologies often stems from resistance to societal changes[134]. Morshedul Alam and Shamim Ahmad conclude that capitalist traits, like Buchanan's behavior in TGG, reflect capitalism's materialistic ideas, stripping away human qualities[135]. Ultimately, the desire to safeguard a specific bloodline for the preservation of inherited wealth inherently carries a dehumanizing and frequently overtly racist aspect, especially noticeable in *#oldmoney*.

ARGUMENT 2: Glorification of "purity" connected to "being white"

Linked to *ARGUMENT 1*, *#oldmoney* advocates a misguided belief in an idealized *old-money* purity, particularly evident in its reactionary representation of women via the hashtag, reminiscent of how F. Scott Fitzgerald and Baz Luhrmann depict Daisy Buchanan. There is an inherent idea of WASP, particularly female, purity in Daisy as the "idealized white Southern belle,"[136] whom her husband Tom tries to protect from marrying "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere"[137] (TGG), thus safeguarding their WASP community from defilement. Yet, Daisy is idealized in appearance only, reflecting a male gaze typical of literature from that era. Her consistent association with gold and white in both the novel and the movie suggests purity and innocence, reinforcing racist stereotypes typically linked to fair women[138]. Joan S. Korenman points out that Daisy's traits align with those of fair-haired heroines from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, contrasting with the often "foreign blood" portrayal of "dark women" in literature at the time[139]. Luhrmann's portrayal, which serves as a reference for many *#oldmoney* posts[140], exacerbates this issue, depicting platinum blonde Carey Mulligan as a version of Daisy that is so fair it appears almost unnatural. His Daisy really is "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor"[141]. He

[131]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 38.
[132]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 39.
[133]Slater, Peter Gregg. (1973): 59.
[134]Lena, Alberto. (1998): 32.
[135]Alam, Morshedul and Ahmad, Shamim. (2021): 132.
[136]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 42.
[137]Fitzgerald, F. Scott. (1926/2012): 130.
[138]Korenman, Joan S. (1975): 576.
[139]Korenman, Joan S. (1975): 577.
[140]See for example: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNddq6r8m/ [11.05.2025].
[141]Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "The Great Gatsby." London: Penguin, 1926/2021: 151.

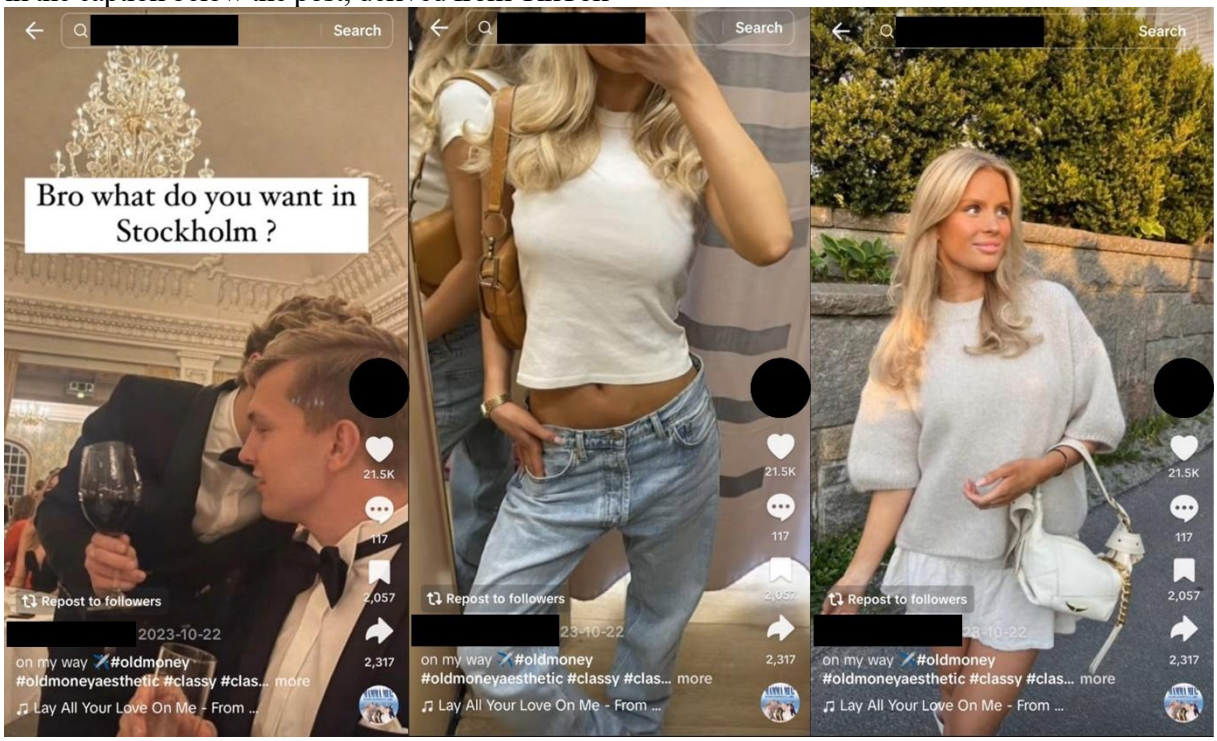
idealizes her innocent appearance while highlighting Daisy's lackluster character: "Daisy has only beautiful face without any initiative, relying on males"[142]. Yuwen Zhu argues this negative portrayal reflects men's biases and fears of women in the early 20th century[143]. However, Leland S. Person, Jr. criticizes maligning Daisy's character and views her as victimized by a "male tendency to project a self-satisfying, yet ultimately dehumanizing, image on women"[144].

This discussion of Daisy Buchanan's character plays little role in *#oldmoney* on social media. Users echo Baz Luhrmann's portrayal of her as a fair heroine, admiring her clothing and extravagant, male-dependent lifestyle while celebrating her quote about being "a beautiful little fool"[145]. A female user on TikTok posted, "[I know] I said I wanted to be Paris Hilton a week ago but now I want to be Daisy Buchanan […] *#oldmoney*", alongside Pinterest photos of a romanticized Daisy-like life[146]. Other videos celebrate Daisy's fair, white, and golden aesthetic[147], presenting her as an ideal of purity, ignoring negative depictions of her character. Whether users replicate stereotypes from Fitzgerald's novel or Luhrmann's movie, this depiction of Daisy reinforces racial biases seen in the portrayal of supposedly *old-money* women (see Figure 7).

Several decades ago, A. E. Elmore traced the constant association of the Buchanans with white to their obsession with being part of the "white race"[148]. This ironic connection has evolved into an explicit fetishization of white women, particularly young Scandinavian girls, on social media in the name of *#oldmoney*. While Women of Color are frequently stereotyped as vulgar, immature, and impure, white women are depicted as classy, mature, pure, and desirable, often serving as a direct contrast to the former. Catching a flight with your "bro" to Stockholm to get yourself a Swedish woman, treating her as though she were merely a pretty souvenir, has become a disturbing running gag in the *#oldmoney* community and beyond (see Figure 8). This not only exhibits blatant sexism (see *ARGUMENT 3*), but harbors a fundamentally right-wing extremist belief in the superiority of the white race, which is associated with the supposed *old money* WASP community.

[142]Zhu, Yuwen. (2016): 96.
[143]Zhu, Yuwen. (2016): 98.
[144]Person, Leland S. (1978): 257.
[145]See for example: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNddq8Dtr/ [11.05.2025].
[146]Source: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNddVwG88/ [11.05.2025].
[147]See footnote 138 and 143.
[148]Elmore, A. E. (1970): 428, 440.

Figure 8. This figure shows one example of the Stockholm-meme, fostering the explicit fetishization of white women, particularly young Scandinavian girls, on social media in the name of #oldmoney. #oldmoney and #oldmoneyaesthetic can be found in the caption below the post; derived from TikTok



Source: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdRNk2vn/ [24.03.2025].

ARGUMENT 3: Propagation of "traditional" gender roles

The literature review highlights that right-wing players adopting neoliberal ideas often criticize the welfare state, focusing on personal responsibility, family, and *Volksgemeinschaft*[149]. Particularly, the emphasis on supposedly "traditional" family values aims to sustain and protect the *Volksgemeinschaft*, which inherently promotes the reproduction of one's own nation. Consequently, this leads to a retrogressive endorsement of "traditional" gender roles, also observable under *#oldmoney*.

While Daisy Buchanan is arguably the most celebrated female character in the world of Gatsby regarding *#oldmoney* on social media (see *ARGUMENT 2*), Affroni asserts that she is also the most oppressed character in TGG[150]. Daisy is oppressed not only by her husband Tom but also by the patriarchal system itself[151]. He further states: "She is described as being beautiful and innocent who represents the feature of femininity. It is in contrast with Tom whose appearance symbolizes masculinity"[152]. This illustrates how Fitzgerald portrays traditional gender roles, particularly through the characters of Daisy and Tom, showcasing the power and dominance of the

[149]Butterwegge, Christoph. (2001): 86.
[150]Affroni, A. (2013): 6.
[151]ibid.
[152]ibid.

patriarchal system[153]. Affroni also highlights that Tom Buchanan attempts to "buy" women, including his wife, with his power and status, and he is considered immune to moral or social values as the subject of patriarchy[154]. Yet, he overlooks the fact that Daisy is also oppressed by her former lover and the shimmering hero of the story, Jay Gatsby. Even though Tom Buchanan despises him, Gatsby remains an incredibly wealthy man who is admired by many and a subject of patriarchy himself. Gatsby is no better than his antagonist regarding "buying" women like Daisy, as he only amassed this wealth to compete with Buchanan. Additionally, he has patriarchal expectations for Daisy concerning her leaving her husband for the new, wealthy version of himself to "repeat the past"[155]. Hakar Taha Khalid argues that Daisy targets a materialistic goal for marriage[156], meaning she also submits herself to the capitalist patriarchal system. This complies with Mulghani et al., who state that in TGG, exploitation is not limited to economic resources, but all characters are the epitome of self-exploitation and self-deception[157]. Yet, villainizing Daisy for her materialistic motivations would be incorrect since, as Leland S. Person, Jr. stated, the simplistic polarization of characters into Good Boy (Jay Gatsby) and Bad Girl (Daisy Buchanan) stems from a critical double standard and undermines the complexity of TGG[158]. Daisy can be viewed as more of a victim, victimized by a male tendency to project a self-satisfying, dehumanizing image onto women[159]. Affroni and Zhu agree that Jordan Baker is the only female character who manages to free herself from oppression and can therefore be seen as a representative of a modern woman in TGG[160].

However, Jordan Baker does not receive much attention, either in TGG or under *#oldmoney*; instead, all the focus is on Daisy Buchanan. Rather than criticizing the stereotypes imposed on Daisy, users glorify and celebrate them on social media (see Figures 5 and 9). They even portray it as desirable to submit oneself to such reactionary, patriarchal, supposedly "traditional," often explicitly antifeminist societal expectations (see Figure 10). This reproduction and glorification of misogynistic images of women includes two implications that require further explanation: 1) It employs a glamorous, so-called "*old money* aesthetic," inspired by TGG, to disguise its oppressive, patriarchal nature, and 2) normalizes misogynistic and antifeminist positions on social media, which, in turn, directly affects gender roles in the non-digital world. As shown, for example, in Figure 10, women celebrate financial dependency on their husbands by using *#oldmoney*. The oppressive core of this promoted lifestyle vanishes beneath a simultaneously promoted image of easy living in glamour and wealth. While this exaggerated depiction may carry some ironic undertone, it still glorifies female co-dependency, normalizes reactionary life plans, and makes them appealing again to young girls. This plays into the hands of right-wing populists, right-wing extremists, and antifeminist movements in general, as

[153]Affroni, A. (2013): 5.
[154]ibid.
[155]Fitzgerald, F. Scott. (1926/2012): 111.
[156]Khalid, Hakar Taha. (2023): 9.
[157]Mulghani et al. (2023): 188.
[158]Person, Leland S. (1978): 257.
[159]ibid.
[160]Affroni, A. (2013): 7-9; Zhu, Yuwen. (2016): 97.

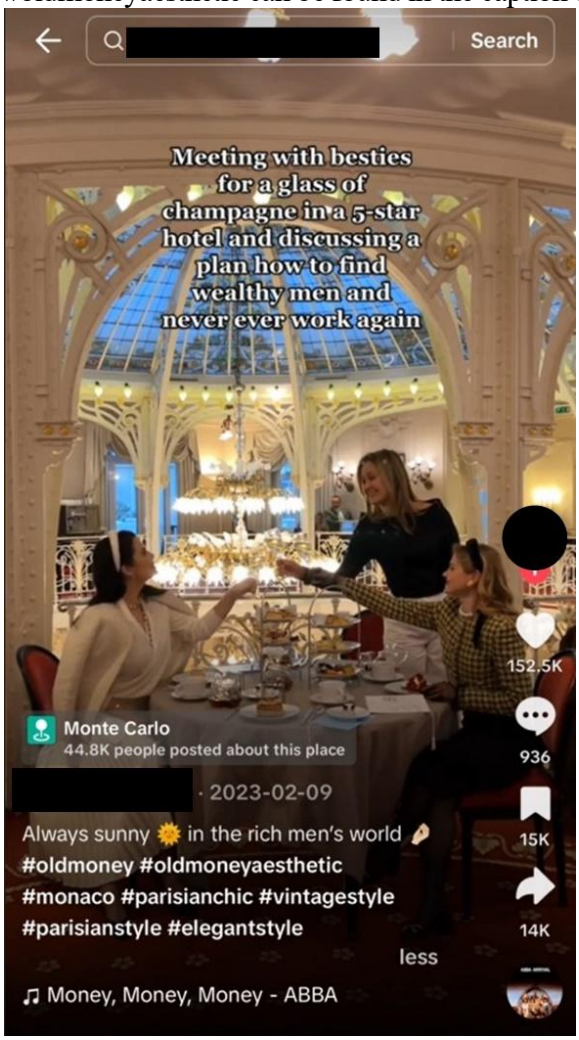
maintaining and reinforcing patriarchal structures lies at the very heart of their ideological beliefs, in which the strong (in this case, men) should prevail over the weak[161] (in this case, women). Yuwen Zhu believes the negative portrayal of female characters in TGG reflects men's prejudice, dissatisfaction, and fear of women as well as women's increasing rights during the early 20th century[162]. Testing this assumption about portrayals of women in relation to *#oldmoney* would be particularly interesting, especially concerning the reasons why women celebrate patriarchal and antifeminist narratives and conditions, as shown in Figures 9 and 10.

Figure 9. This figure illustrates one example of "old money rules" that are specifically directed at women, supporting unrealistic beauty ideals. The woman depicted is an icon of the old money fandom - and she is AI-generated. #oldmoney can be found in the caption below the post, which has been excluded for formatting reasons only; derived from TikTok

Source: https://www.tiktok.com/@femmechic_inspo/video/7277833166080068897?r=1&_t=Z N-8uvQCdXw9pu [24.03.2025].

[161]Butterwegge, Christoph. (2008): 205.
[162]Zhu, Yuwen. (2016): 98.

Figure 10. This figure shows an example of the unreflected adoption and romanticization of reactionary role expectations imposed on women. #oldmoney and #oldmoneyaesthetic can be found in the caption below the post; derived from TikTok



Source: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdRNTeeK/ [24.03.2025].

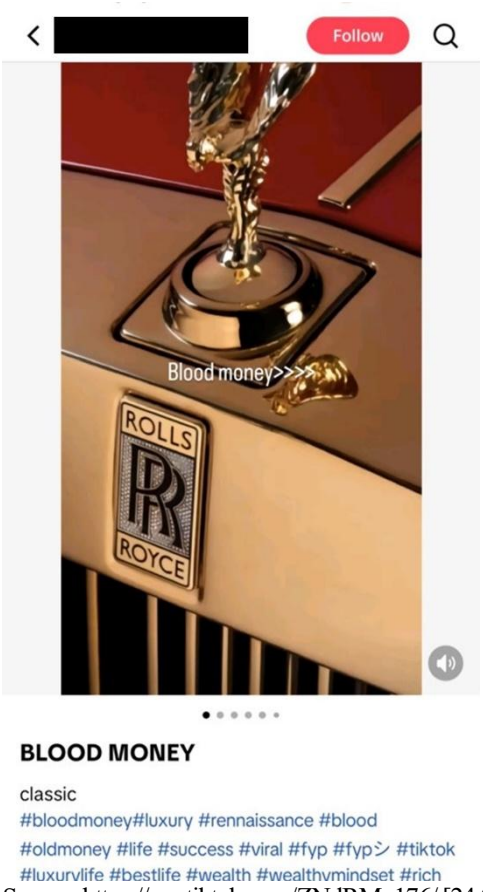
ARGUMENT 4: Hence, others who do not fulfill ARGUMENTS 1 to 3 are degraded

The implicit and explicit degradation of feminism and modern women (see *ARGUMENT 3*) represents only one, albeit crucial, aspect of the overall degradation of others through the *#oldmoney* trend. *#oldmoney* categorizes individuals based on social worth, determined by the type and amount of wealth they hold. This conforms to the neoliberal distinctions between the "exploitable" and "unexploitable," the "free" and "unfree," the "deserving" and "undeserving"[163]. At its core, *#oldmoney* glorifies inherited wealth, inherently degrading anyone who does not possess it or who, at the very least, does not align with what is promoted and perceived as "*old money* values." The origin of the perceived *old money* is irrelevant for *#oldmoney*. Consequently,

[163]Kundnani, Arun. (2021): 64.

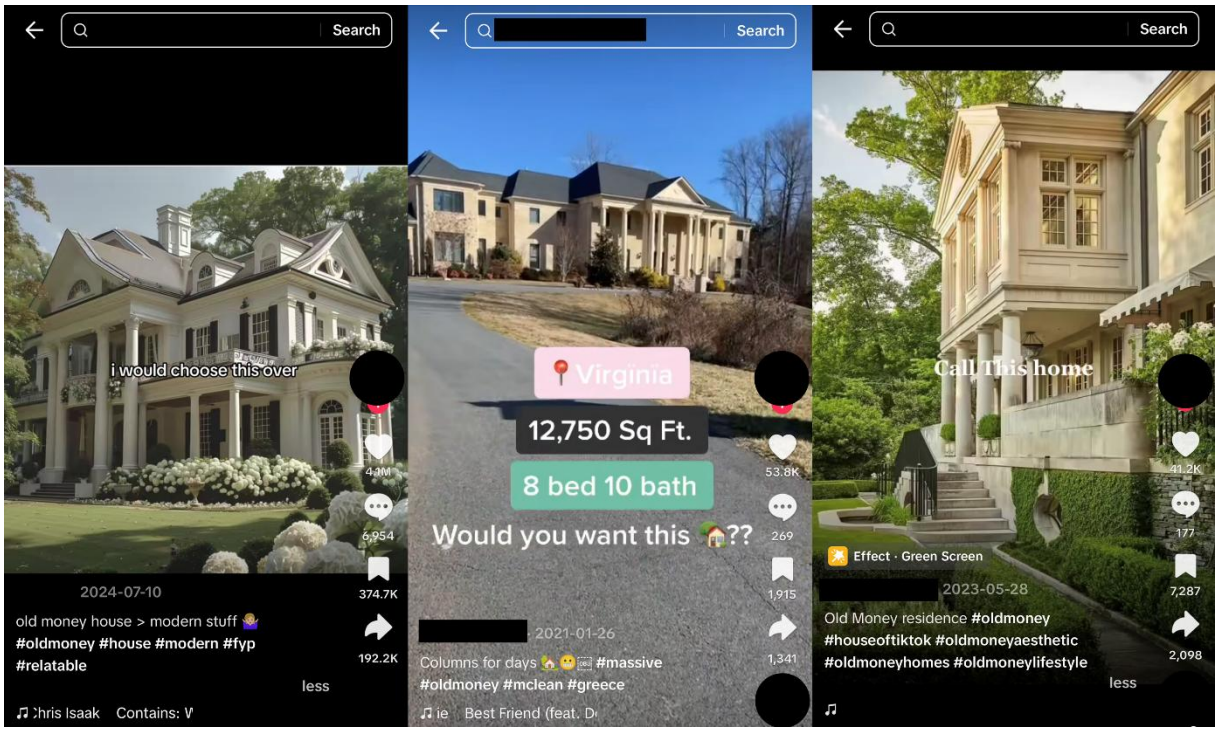
users do not hesitate to openly glorify "Blood money" (see Figure 11). Another notable example is the often uncritically praised "aesthetic" of numerous houses labeled "*old money* homes" on social media. Their pillars, roof styles, porches, driveways, outdoor staircases, and color evoke memories of plantation houses – residences in the Southern United States once inhabited by slave owners (see Figure 12). This illustrates that *#oldmoney* not only glorifies sexist but also racist and colonial structures and narratives.

Figure 11. This figure shows an example of the open celebration of "Blood money". ">>>>" is a mimetic internet slang term that means "better than anything". #oldmoney and #bloodmoney can be found in the caption below the post; derived from TikTok



Source: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNdRMx176/ [24.03.2025].

Figure 12. This figure illustrates three examples of houses celebrated as "old money homes" included in different videos. Their significant architecture evokes memories of plantation houses. #oldmoney can be found in the captions below the posts; derived from TikTok



Sources: https://www.tiktok.com/@irgendeinelenia/video/7389961606798626081; https://www.tiktok.com/@homeinsiderr/video/6922093569658408197; https://www.tiktok.com/@inabilliondreams/video/7238083392170937608 [11.05.2025].

This revisits Arun Kundnani's argument that neoliberalism creates its unique system of racial oppression[164]. He suggests that racial domination is intertwined with the neoliberal reconfiguration of social, political, cultural, and economic aspects[165]. What Kundnani calls neo-racism is evident, inter alia, in the examples depicted of *#oldmoney*'s obsession with bloodline (see *ARGUMENT 1*), whiteness (see *ARGUMENT 2*), and inherited (blood) money. It also manifests in the recurring plantation house aesthetic of "*old money* homes," which involves a disregard for America's racist history, as well as in the openly expressed desire to protect "*old money* blood" by reinforcing traditional gender roles (see *ARGUMENT 3*) to maintain the patriarchal structures of the closed WASP community among the super wealthy. As Kundnani assumed, Neo-racism does its ideological work by "displacing the political conflicts generated by neoliberalism onto the more comfortable terrain of clashes of culture"[166]. This inevitably leads to the dehumanization of non-WASP groups. For example, depriving individuals who do not embody the presumed characteristics of *old money* of their status as actual men or women, and ultimately as human beings, is a prevalent sub-trend of *#oldmoney* (see Figures 13 and 14).

[164]Kundnani, Arun. (2021): 52.
[165]ibid.
[166]Kundnani, Arun. (2021): 64.

Figures 13 and 14. This example shows one version of depriving individuals who do not embody the presumed characteristics of old money of their status as actual men (or women). These allegedly ironic clips are a popular sub-trend of #oldmoney. #oldmoney and #oldmoneyaesthetic can be found in the caption below the post. Figures 13 and 14 are part of the same video and have been separated for formatting reasons only; derived from TikTok

Source: https://www.tiktok.com/@renley.store/video/7480792795389742354?_r=1&_t=ZN-8ureC7XUQUg [24.03.2025].

The *#oldmoney* trend ultimately sustains a system rooted in discrimination that is, at its core, an exclusive one. Regardless of how much social media users aspire to "become *old money*," individuals from lower classes will never truly belong to the

community they admire and idealize online. This is due to the focus on predetermined factors, such as bloodline, whiteness, and heritage. No matter how many tutorials on "how to behave *old money*" or "how to dress *old money*" users consume, they will always chase a lifestyle that, according to the actual *old money* community, was never meant for them. Yet, the real-life *old money* community tolerates this because the public's currently popular degradation of others, especially *new money* individuals, reinforces and justifies their own identity as *old money*.

Discussion

The individuals who uphold and reinforce the autopoietic system of *#oldmoney* – which is rooted in racist, sexist, colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist narratives – are not the ones profiting from it, specifically the *old money* community. Instead, it is the social media users who likely come from lower-class or working-class backgrounds, even though they receive no benefits from sustaining the existing class structure. Especially their viral online hatred under *#oldmoney* directed at *new money* seems paradoxical at first glance. If anything, the majority of society, particularly working-class people, should celebrate and glorify their peers reaching new wealth, since these are the ones "making it," the ones who have defeated the capitalist system, and those who could serve as actual inspiration. Instead, young people glorify the exact opposite of the self-made man[167] by using *#oldmoney*. In doing so, they promote and justify a community that is not only unreachable for them but, in many cases, has built its wealth on the backs of the user's social class. This is for two reasons:

1) Just as in TGG, when Tom Buchanan redirects George Wilson's anger about his wife's death at Jay Gatsby, the *#oldmoney* trend redirects societal and working-class anger away from inherited wealth and long-established class differences to a few once lower-class individuals with new wealth. In a Marxist sense, bourgeois *old-money* groups benefit from this strategy, preventing conflicts that could threaten their status. This ties to Joseph Vogel's analysis of George Wilson, whose wife has an affair with Tom and is fatally struck by a car driven by Daisy. Vogel argues that George is socialized to admire *old-money* men and clings to the American Dream[168], akin to social media users glorifying inherited wealth under *#oldmoney*. Instead of connecting with fellow workers, Wilson and his wife seek to impress Buchanan[169]. This mirrors the social media user who thinks that by mimicking the manners of the *old money* elite, they will gain acceptance. Following his wife's death, George's anger shifts from the actual sources of his loss (*old money*; the Buchanans) to an easier target, Jay Gatsby (*new money*)[170]. This reflects how social media users express frustrations regarding their own status towards individuals with *new money*, rather than addressing the long-standing inequalities inherent in capitalist society, by participating in *#oldmoney*.

[167]Lena, Alberto. (1998): 32.
[168]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 48.
[169]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 48f.
[170]Vogel, Joseph. (2015): 50.

2) Stereotypical thinking that belittles others comforts those struggling in capitalist systems. It allows individuals to express anger towards accessible targets instead of confronting complex capitalist mechanisms or the upper class. As Theodor W. Adorno claims, modern fascism originates from the ongoing concentration of capital[171], leading to the potential for permanent declassification. Affected groups divert blame for their possible declassification from the underlying mechanisms, pointing fingers instead at critics of the system they once benefited from[172]. In the context of *#oldmoney*, users, unconsciously fearing declassification, direct their anger toward two groups: *no-money* and *new-money* people. *No-money* individuals face neoliberal criticism for their perceived lack of effort, suggesting "Everyone can succeed in capitalism!", or for exploiting the welfare system. *New-money* individuals are viewed as tricksters who have bypassed capital's natural selection. The exclusion of *new-money* from *old-money* circles, and from those who romanticize *old money*, serves as a coping mechanism for confronting the capitalist mystification of acquired versus inherited wealth. Thus, the *#oldmoney* trend can be seen as a digital manifestation of *fetishism* in a Marxist sense, stemming from the discord between the genuine essence and the blindly perceived appearance of capitalism[173].

#oldmoney is a trend rooted in current online logics with high virality potential, utilizing various pop cultural references, particularly targeting young audiences. When paired with sexist, racist, or other degrading narratives, the at its core degrading nature of *#oldmoney* creates a harmful aestheticization of neoliberalism. These neoliberal digital daydreams on TikTok obstruct social change and subtly promote right-wing extremist ideologies on social media, masked as an apolitical and ironic hashtag.

Conclusions

At first glance, *#oldmoney* appears to be a harmless internet trend that gained popularity, particularly on TikTok, in the early 2020s. Soon, this hashtag, which celebrates inherited wealth and the lifestyle of the ultra-rich, began to influence the fashion, behaviors, and lifestyles of young people in real life. However, it promotes degrading attitudes such as sexism and racism, leading to the normalization and dissemination of right-wing extremist narratives. This paper seeks to establish a theoretical foundation for understanding the potential connections between this new aestheticization of neoliberalism and the spread of right-wing extremist ideas on social media. It does so by employing a Marxist reading of *The Great Gatsby*, the most prevalent pop cultural reference associated with *#oldmoney*, thereby articulating four key arguments that explain the relationship between *#oldmoney* and right-wing extremist narratives:

ARGUMENT 1: Focus on predetermined factors (e.g., "bloodline")
ARGUMENT 2: Glorification of "purity" connected to "being white"
ARGUMENT 3: Propagation of "traditional" gender roles

[171]Adorno, Theodor, W. (2019): 10.
[172]ibid.
[173]Marx, Karl. Werke, Band 23. (1962): 85, 108, 169.

ARGUMENT 4: Hence, others who do not fulfill ARGUMENTS 1 to 3 are degraded

Engaging in the *#oldmoney* trend serves two related purposes: Users express frustrations about their social and economic conditions towards *new-money* "tricksters" rather than addressing deep-rooted inequalities in capitalism. Additionally, stereotypes that belittle others provide comfort to those affected by capitalist systems, resulting in sexism and racism justified as apolitical and ironic under the hashtag.

Future research should not only consider apparently harmless (mimetic) internet trends collectively as potential disseminators of right-wing extremist narratives, as this phenomenon has already been identified and comprehensively examined. Now, it is time to explore the mechanisms behind these trends and analyze specific examples. *#oldmoney* is undoubtedly not the only internet trend that continues to thrive in the digital space without facing any significant criticism of its problematic implications. Besides exploring these other trends, the subject of *#oldmoney* remains a valuable area for research. Exploring how consumers, especially younger audiences, perceive, reflect on, and ultimately choose to like or share controversial *#oldmoney* content would be interesting. The theoretical approach presented in this paper prompts striking questions about whether audiences actively consider the negative facets of the trend or are misled by the appealing image of the seemingly innocent and ironic hashtag.

If researchers do not recognize the complexity of digital trends, they will likely miss their associated risks. To understand how modern trends, such as *#oldmoney*, not only bolster potentially antidemocratic narratives but also reflect our current cultural climate, scholars must seriously engage with these issues, conduct detailed analyses, and raise awareness. Otherwise, social media acts as an unregulated space for those who skillfully understand and manipulate trends like *#oldmoney* for their political gain.

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