POLIS

VOLUME 1 - ISSUE 1

SASU UNDERGRAD JOURNAL

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Letters from the team

A few semesters ago, a conversation with Professor Bascom Guffin ignited my curiosity about academic publishing. Hearing other departments discuss their journals sparked the idea that our Sociology and Anthropology department should have an undergraduate journal. With guidance from SASU's incredible President Hannah, I became convinced that our student body needed this platform. Initially, I thought this journal would be an outlet to explore academia as someone who has never quite felt like an academic. As I navigated the challenging publishing process, however, I realized what truly inspires me are the brilliant papers written by friends, peers, and faculty. It brings me immense joy to have created a space to celebrate the outstanding work of SA students. I'm also deeply grateful for the instrumental and generous help from faculty, staff members (Esther & Terrance), the FASS team (Brian), and our digital publishing librarian Kate. From practically stalking Nat and convincing them to become an Editor, to all of the team members that I coerced into joining, I'm most proud and thankful for the incredible journal team (Nat, Erin, Xander, Ariana, Hannah, Jacqueline, Sofia, & Citlalli) who have supported me throughout this journey. Without them, this journal would not be a reality. To me, POLIS is about bonds of community, friendship, and mentorship in academia that drive us to learn and create. I hope that this journal will act as a similar outlet for authors and readers alike. *—Anum, Editor-in-Chief*

Being here to get POLIS off the ground and having the opportunity to help students further develop their scholarship has been a wonderful experience that will be a defining memory of my time at SFU. The POLIS team are not only a talented and creative group of people but formed a tight-knit and warm circle who have been a joy to work with. Also, I'm sure our editor-in-chief Anum is far too gracious to mention it, but the handmade, custom bookmarks she ordered for every single team member was touching beyond belief. I will treasure mine for as many decades as it holds together. *—Nat, Editor*

Being a part of building POLIS from the ground up was such a special experience. Engaging more deeply with sociology in this way undoubtedly enriched my worldview, but more importantly, I feel so lucky to have worked together with this passionate and inspiring group of people. *—Erin, Editor*

Sociology and Anthropology help us understand the fabric of reality we move through. Our research papers allow us to investigate subjects we are passionate about and guide our own education. However, knowledge only holds value when it is accessible and shared. There is no reason the knowledge we accrue as undergraduate students cannot hold this value. The work all of you do to make sense of the world is, if anything, more special because it is being done during the period of so many of our lives as we discover who we are. I am grateful to have helped create a space for the knowledge we've attained to have greater value. I hope this journal can be a place for us all to share ourselves and the research that shapes us. And maybe, we can help shape each other. *—Xander, Reviewer*

Reviewing submissions to the journal highlighted how bright the future of academia is. The authors in this first edition presented fresh and vibrant topics, ideas, and perspectives. They sparked excitement not only for the final copy of POLIS' first edition but for what's to come in the future of the journal. *—Jacqueline, Reviewer*

Participating in POLIS has given me the confidence to write better and in turn, to be a better peer reviewer. I am continually inspired by the thoughtful and creative ways in which SA undergrads weigh in on some of the most pressing issues that we are faced with. I am fortunate to be a part of a team that is thoughtful, kind, and compassionate. I see these as the bulk of our strengths which tether us to our work. I hope you enjoy our first edition! *—Citlalli, Reviewer*

My first semester with the journal was amazing! I met so many cool people through SASU and I'm so grateful for the opportunity to work with everyone to put out the issue. Being a part of such a passionate and driven group was a truly unique experience. *—Sofia, Reviewer*

It has been great working with everyone, and I am so proud of our progress and hard work. It has been so exciting to get POLIS from being a figment of imagination to being a real, published journal —and we couldn't have done it without our fantastic teamwork. See you guys next semester! *—Ariana, Designer*

Being able to watch POLIS blossom and grow from being just a concept to a reality has been so awesome!!! It has been such a privilege to be a sounding board for our exceptional Chief Editor, Anum, whose passion permeates every aspect of this journal. Bearing witness to the magic of the POLIS team working together to make this first issue a space for an array of researchers and creative minds has also been a privilege and I cannot wait to see how POLIS grows in the coming years! *—Hannah, Reviewer*

Photos by Xander Elstone

Towards an Understanding of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" Through Queer Assimilationism

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Abstract

Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policy marks an important moment in the history of queer rights in the United States of America—while outwardly ending the military's ban on Queer servicemembers, the protections this policy offers hinges on any given servicemember's willingness to conceal their queer identity. Historical research on the American queer rights movement contextualizes this era of policy within a broader move away from the radicalism of its past and towards demands of queer into inclusion into previously exclusive facets of American life. This presents space for analysis into how and why this rhetorical shift occurs, and consequently with what effectiveness this shift presents to the demands expressed by the American queer rights movement. Utilizing Michel Foucault's conception of *interest*, this paper argues for an understanding of DADT through the *interest* generating potential of this rhetorical shift that makes possible the aims of DADT. Through widespread adoption of strategies aimed at aligning queer identities with heteronormative ideals, the American queer rights movement defines 'the right to

fight' as an addressable issue, and thus makes possible a policy which acts upon this issue. This stresses the importance of interest theory in the analysis of the American queer rights movement, and thus contributes to an understanding of how social movements affect change.

Keywords: DADT, Assimilationism, Interest Theory

O N DECEMBER 21, 1993, The United States Department of Defense issued a new directive on the subject of "Qualification Standards for Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction." A major consequence of this directive was the introduction of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' (DADT). DADT, as a policy which guided military legislation until the policy's dissolution in 2011, stipulated that "[armed forces] applicants … shall not be asked or required to reveal their sexual orientation" however, "homosexual conduct may be grounds for barring entry into the armed forces" (DOD 1993, 1–5). The dissolution of DADT followed a decline in the actual use of this policy for the purposes of discharging openly gay service members. This fact provides a point of departure for elucidating a split in belief amongst the Queer rights movement who find themselves at the whim of such policy. Undoubtedly, decreased persecution of queer peoples in any respect is progress for American queer rights. To the antimilitarist, however, this fact mirrors an expansion of the U.S. military in potential personnel and thus contributes to furthering problematic American overseas incentives (Rimmerman 2014). The American Queer rights movement found a broad base of support amongst the political unrest of late 1960s American life—particularly anti-Vietnam war organizing (Suran 2001). How is it, then, that this movement found itself just 30 years later arguing for the right to participate in such military action?

'The right to fight' is an ongoing point of contention within the American Queer rights movement: it seeks to define what the goals of the movement should be, and thus what Queer rights should ideally look like. Should Queerness conform to the heterosexual standard in all but sexual identity, or should it reject this standard and seek to embody more radical critique of American life? If we know that disparate perspectives on military participation exist within the American Queer rights movement, how is it that we can understand DADT as a response to a seemingly unified call for 'the right to fight'? To answer this, I suggest that we can understand this moment in American Queer rights with respect to the networks of knowledge production that inform it. I posit that we can understand this through employing Michel Foucault's conception of interest. My analysis will argue for an understanding of DADT policy informed, and thus made possible, by a specific rhetoric of Queer rights advocacy; the aforementioned 'right to fight.' I will term this the 'DADT era of activism.' This is done with the intention of showing that the Queer rights movement is not determined by any one legislative policy or act, but rather the broader social movements to which these policies or acts respond to. It is in this sense that both the enacting of DADT and its dissolution can both be viewed as acting in the same direction of progress, in that the 'right to fight' becomes the dominant definition of progress within the American Queer rights movement. I will be using an article by American activist Barbara Smith titled "Where's the Revolution?" as a discursive artifact, as well as several histories of the American Queer rights movement during this era, to inform an understanding of the adoption of the 'right to fight' amongst a changing landscape of advocacy preceding and following DADT. The adoption of the 'right to fight' rhetoric, and the interest generating potential it represents, thus makes DADT possible as an attempt to address this end. This, ultimately, will stress the importance of interest generation as a key concept for analysis of the DADT era of the American Queer rights movement.

Terminology

In this paper I use the term Queer when referring to sexual or gender identities that do not conform to heteronormative ideas; in my practice this is a catchall term. When applicable I will use more pointed terms to convey the relevance of specific identities as might be present in the texts discussed. When speaking of DADT, for example, I will use the term LGB[1] as it portrays the limited scope of identities under the regulation of such policy. In analysis of the article by Smith, 'lesbian and gay' is used, thus when discussing this text I will use the same phraseology.

Applying Interest Theory to American Queer Rights

To understand DADT policy as it relates to the discourse of Queer-rights activism, I will be using Foucault's conception of interest as a theoretical framework. Interest is a power constituted by "that respect in which a given individual, thing, wealth, and so on interests other individuals or the collective body of individuals" (Foucault 2008, 45). In other words, interest is a social power whose effectiveness to act toward a given end operates with the population's desire to see that end met. Interest is a concept taken from Foucault's series of lectures at the Collège de France, particularly in the volumes adapted from his lecture series of 1977 through 1979. Generally, Foucault's work centers around understanding *how* power operates and not *who* possesses power. Among many things, these lectures concern themselves with understanding the development of the 'technologies of power' underpinning a contemporary conception of governance. So, what is a technology of power, how does it relate to interest, and what does this concept make possible for analyses of social movements?

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[1] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual. Exclusive of nonconforming and Trans peoples.

The idea of technologies of power is born from an analytic methodology that seeks to avoid reductions of power to those dynamics originating within the institution, the state notwithstanding. Indeed, "…the state, doubtless no more today than in the past, does not have this unity, individuality, and rigorous functionality, nor, I would go so far as to say, this importance" (Foucault 2008, 109). For Foucault, an analysis of the state, or any institution for that matter, as the progenitor of power leads to a reduction in the complexity of how power operates. It thus becomes necessary to "move outside the institution [so as to] replace it with the overall view of the technology of power" (Foucault 2007, 109). To demonstrate this methodology, Foucault (2007) gives the example of military discipline:

> "We may say that the disciplinarization [referring to the process by which the military is constituted as a unified force through the process of disciplinary action] of the army is due to its control by the state. However, when disciplinarization is connected, not with a concentration of state control, but with the problem of floating populations, the importance of commercial networks, technical inventions, … community management, a whole network of alliance, support, and communication constitutes the 'genealogy' of military discipline." (2007, 119)

This is to say that the disciplinarization of the military is not imposed by 'the state,' but is rather constituted by several intersecting actors. Returning this example to interest, we might say that these intersecting factors each act as an interest-generator*:* they affect a continuation of military disciplinarization based on the aspirations that are met through this exertion of power.

Interest, then, is a technology of power open to utilization by social actors on the pretense that there is potential in existing collective aspirations *or* potential

to shape said aspirations. An example of interest as it relates to Queer rights might yield through historical analysis a history of medicine, organized religion, or military rhetoric negatively affecting interest in Queer rights. However, interest as a technology of power is not built upon any one institution involved in the proliferation of negative interest. Certainly, such institutions will act through interest generation to incite against Queer rights, but so too can Queer rights advocates positively affect the same interest in Queer rights to pursue their own goals. Thus, interest is a technology of power that can be utilized by any number of actors or institutions to affect social change. Understanding rhetorical shifts in American Queer rights activism will allow for a history of the interest-generation projects within the Queer rights movement that can contextualize the history of DADT as a policy.

A History of Discourse within the American Queer Rights Movement

Aaron Belkin (2003), an advocate for the repeal of DADT, states that DADT differs as a policy from its other discriminatory predecessors in that, on paper, it protects LGB applicants from questions regarding sexuality (109). In practice however, this was oftentimes disregarded, and these practices of questioning continued off-record (Servicemembers Legal Defense Network as cited in Lehring 2003, 138; Werner 2014). The official justification for this continued ban of 'outness' cites 'unit cohesion' as a priority that is fundamentally threatened by the presence of openly LGB servicemembers, despite evidence to the contrary (Belkin 2003, 109, 110–16; Estes 2005; National Defense Research Institute 2010, 157). Indeed, what served to 'maintain camaraderie' was often detrimental to that end in that it required secrecy on the part of LGB servicemembers (Trivette 2010). Belkin (2003) notes a commonality amongst rhetorical justification of this policy. Often, there is a reliance upon anecdotal evidence supporting a vision of 'out' LGB

peoples as overtly solicitous and disruptive of the heteronormative environment central to unit cohesion (2003, 116-117). These rhetorical justifications are part of a much broader history of homophobic sentiment; formally beginning with the criminalization of sodomy in World War I's 'Articles of War' sentiment and state regulation which thereafter saw expansion of its narrative beyond the homosexual act. This negative sentiment and regulation act to form the homosexual identity, or what Gary Lehring (2003) in his work on gay military identity terms the "official gay*"* (2003, 15–17). The transition from public conception of homosexuality as an act in isolation to an essentialized character flaw had a drastic impact on the lives of servicemembers discharged for homosexuality. The 'GI Bill,'[2] for instance, was one of the most consequential welfare acts of the postwar period pertaining to military veterans and servicemembers. This legislation, however, contained clauses that exempted those discharged for homosexuality, denying them benefits such as guaranteed tuition, unemployment pay, and low-interest housing and business loans based on the immutable character of this officially gay identity (Altschuler and Blumin 2009; Canaday 2003).

The Assimilationist Turn

Belkin's (2003) work represents a perspective that seeks to normalize Queer identities within the status quo by arguing for inclusion of Queer identities into facets of American life such as military service or marriage law. In much of the literature concerning itself with understanding this shift in the broader American Queer rights movement, this is called 'homonormativity' (Montegary 2015). 'Homonormativity' is a concept authored by Lisa Duggan (2004) in their work on racial and gender inequalities during the neoliberal politics of the 1990s and is used to describe the creation of a Queer identity that is palatable to the rightward shift

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[2] The 'GI Bill' is a colloquial name for various pieces of legislation, all serving the end of servicemember reintegration into civilian life. See Editor's Note in Altschuler & Blumin (2009).

of that era (Duggan 2004; Werner 2014). Homonormativity embraces the immutable 'official gay,' opting to replace this identity's segregated status with 'a seat at the table.' This perspective is what Queer American historian Craig A. Rimmerman (2014) refers to as 'assimilationism'. This perspective generally seeks to "work within the system" to "let us in," or attempts to affect inclusion of Queer identities previously excluded from existing structures due to historical discrimination (Rimmerman 2014, 5). Activists who maintain critique of these structures beyond their exclusivity of Queer peoples, opting instead to 'live outside of' as protest of broader issues associated with these structures, identify as 'liberationists.' This split in belief is readily apparent in the issue of Queer military participation.

The Liberationist Perspective

In her July 1993 article "Where's the Revolution?" Barbara Smith reflects on the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation of April 25th, 1993, eight months before the enactment of DADT. This march was organized around several demands, among them (and the most notable in the context of DADT) the passage of a "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender civil rights bill and an end to discrimination by state and federal governments including the military…" (March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation 1993). Smith's article centers this demand as a major point of contention, and thus elucidates the split in belief structure between those subscribing to the assimilationist tendency and those, like Smith, who argue for a liberationist approach:

> Nobody sane would want any part of the established order. It was the system–white supremacist, misogynistic, capitalist and homophobic–that had made our lives so hard to begin with. We wanted something entirely new. Our movement was called lesbian

> and gay *liberation*, and more than a few of us, especially women and
> people of color, were working for a *revolution.* (Smith 1993)

The liberationist perspective rejects inclusion into structures which are themselves responsible for the entrenchment and reproduction of white, hetero-patriarchal dominance. Liberationists see assimilationism as turning away from revolutionary action as a core goal of the American Queer rights movement. To Smith (1993), liberationism necessarily includes antimilitarism: "we need a nuanced and principled politics that fights discrimination and at the same time criticizes U.S. militarism and its negative effect on social justice and world peace." The 'right to fight,' contrasts with the liberationist vision Smith is advocating. In adopting beliefs at odds with a liberationist perspective, the March on Washington cedes points that existed previously within these circles of broader, revolution-oriented critique. Smith (1993) states:

> In fact, it's gay white men's racial, gender and class privileges, as
> well as the vast numbers of them who identify with the system
> rather than distrust it, that have made the politics of the current gay
> movement so different from those of other identity-based
> movements for social and political change.

Liberationism, then, seeks not to work within the field of the homonormative identity as does an assimilationist tendency, but instead problematizes this identity as fraught with the otherizations native to a broader American milieu.

Assimilationism as the Prevailing Strategy

This assimilationist tendency, and the current gay movement to which Smith states it is attributed to, is otherwise well documented in literature pertaining to activism under neoliberalism. Duggan's (2004) work on the 'equality politics' of the 1990s and early 2000s, we can further elucidate the motives for such an adoption

of assimilationist tendencies in Queer rights advocacy. A rhetorical shift towards a "'multiculturalism' compatible with the global aspirations of U.S. business interests" is incentivized via the greater efficacy of interest generation such rhetoric enables (Duggan 2004, 44). Duggan (2004) uses the example of the Human Rights Campaign's[3] (HRC) 'Millennium March on Washington,' an event drawing on the marches discussed by Smith, in that it acted seemingly more as a public relations media campaign, relying on corporate sponsorships and top-down organizing rather than grassroots organizing previously common to the American Queer rights movement (2004, 45-46). Liz Montegary (2015) further documents the HRC's promotion of 'right to fight' rhetoric in the appointment of Eric Alva as the spokesperson for their DADT repeal efforts. As a gay marine who has suffered injury during his time in the military, Alva's experience works to "align gay American identity with a militarized form of self-reliant masculinity and sacrificial nationalism" (Montegary 2015, 906). This promotion of a hero figure became a common rhetorical strategy, and thus provides an effective rhetorical strategy for homonormative actors. Following the September 11th attacks, Maggie Werner (2014) states that America found widespread cultural support for renewed military action that oftentimes coalesced around masculinized 'heroes' that signified "American values of justice, fairness, and equality". Thus, the hero mythos is a site of potential interest-generation that dominant actors within the assimilationist movement were able to make effective use of to promote homonormativity through deploying certain cultural myths.

This promotion of the homonormative vision as the goal of Queer rights movements does not seek to address intersecting structural oppressions that some within the broader Queer movement contest as necessary for substantial change. Rather, it shifts the ends in such a way that they are more attainable through interest.

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[3] "The richest national gay and lesbian civil rights lobby in Washington, D.C." (Duggan 2004, 45).

This critique of homonormativity is at the very center of Smith's (1993) writing: assimilationism entering the mainstream as "the new gay political equation" has created an environment in which the official gay becomes a severely limited identity. It is similarly true that this vision of identity is that which becomes the most visible. Thus, we can understand the assimilationist turn in Queer advocacy preceding DADT as the stirrings of a movement which seeks to become a more palatable interest-generating actor through embracing and promoting the homonormative identity. This rhetorical shift lends itself to demystifying the inception of 'the right to fight'. This end, and the policy that attempted to address it, is an artifact of the interest generation associated with the assimilationist turn in Queer advocacy.

Limitations & Directions for Future Study

Rights movements such as that discussed in this paper are complex social actors. It is beneficial to recognize that rhetoric is never adopted with perfect unity, nor is it clear what outcomes particular rhetoric can lead to—we cannot be aware of all the intimate details involved in technologies of power that we might unwittingly be beholden to. What I have argued is not that the assimilationist turn in Queer rights advocacy is to be faulted for DADT policy or for the continuing discrimination of the officially gay identity. Technologies of power are not constituted by any single social movement or institution. Despite the effort I make to contextualize Smith's work via contemporary Queer theories and social movement histories, Smith's article offers analysis of only one social movement involved in the era preceding the drafting of DADT policy —and thus only one facet of the interest surrounding American Queer rights. To this end, scholars concerned with this policy and the discursive context surrounding it make note of intense lobbying on the part of the 'evangelical right' as influential in the drafting of this policy and responsible for the compromised policy that lacked improvement for the lives of Queer servicemembers (Lehring 2003, 137; Werner 2014). If more

work were to be done to understand the interest behind DADT policy, examining this site of interest generation would prove insightful and contribute to a more robust understanding of this policy as well as the future of queer advocacy.

Conclusion

My argumentation shows that this policy could not be formed without something informing it—without something pushing for the ends that this policy found itself trying to reach. This 'something,' in my scope of analysis, is the popularization of assimilationist 'right to fight' rhetoric within the American Queer rights movement. In this way, the rhetorical strategies of these advocates contributed greatly to a discourse that legitimized the legalization of LGB participation in the military, to which DADT policy *and* its eventual repeal had set as its aims.

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The Paranoid Style of Internet Politics: Gamer Backlashes and 'Politics' as Imposition

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Abstract

The 2014 Gamergate movement has since become a model for backlashes and attacks against the inclusion of marginalized identities within the gaming industry. In the decade since the Gamergate movement, a number of similar backlashes have continued to occur, finding new reasons and rationales to attack the inclusion of marginalized people in the narrative of games as well as in the industry more broadly. In early 2024, one of these Gamergate-esque backlashes emerged around the company Sweet Baby Inc., first noticed by anti-woke movements in late 2023. This article examines two Reddit threads discussing Sweet Baby Inc. and analyzes the discourses produced around the company and how this reflects on the ways that anti-woke: gaming backlashes conceptualize notions of 'politics' and 'diversity'.

Keywords: Gamergate, Anti-woke, Sweet Baby Inc., ESG

A SPECTER IS HAUNTING VIDEO GAMES, the specter of *politics*. Much digital ink has been spilled in bemoaning this scourge, hundreds of thousands of forum threads, angry articles, posts, and videos that denounce the ways that politics have infiltrated and indeed *infested* video games. Gamers remain vigilant against this ever-present threat. But what does this really mean? What are 'politics' in video games, for the anti-woke gamer, and what does this tell us about the broader conception of 'politics' in the world?

In 2014, the world was suddenly and violently introduced to the gaming community through Gamergate, a complex and decentralized backlash and harassment campaign nominally centered around "ethics in games journalism," but realistically functioning as a way to police and punish the presence of women in games (Mortensen 2018). This followed years of anti-feminist undercurrents in the gaming culture, and Gamergate itself was in part mobilized against the critical feminist analysis of both games and game culture (Mortensen 2018). Specific women within the games industry and surrounding ecosystem, such as feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, were targeted for the perceived threat they posed to gaming as a hobby and institution (Mortensen 2018). Despite almost a decade of time, and the continued (if messy) integration of marginalized peoples into games through both depiction and industry, the shadow of Gamergate lingers as a force in the minds of gaming's alt-fanbases. The afterlife of Gamergate has been a general anti-feminist and anti-woke milieu that lurks underneath the surface of online gaming cultures.

This undercurrent breaches the surface of gaming culture with semi-regular outbursts of Gamergate-esque sentiments, often manifesting around higher-profile games such as *The Last of Us Part II* (Letizi and Norman 2024). In the last few years, as the 'culture war' and anti-woke discourses have come to dominate the conversation around media and popular politics, gamer backlashes have become clothed in the same language. The terms they use have come to occupy their own

meanings, within this ecosystem, ideas like 'wokeness' divorced from their original contexts and instead understood by the anti-woke as social justice gone mad, inherently hollow, performative, and corrosively inauthentic (Davies and MacRae 2023).

In late February and early March of 2024, the latest echo of Gamergate arrived on the scene. Following the disappointing release of *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League,* gamers searched for a reason that the game was bad. For some, the blame was placed squarely at the feet of 'Sweet Baby Incorporated' (henceforward SBI), a Canadian narrative consultancy firm who worked on the game. The way that gamers responded to SBI presents a case study of how right- wing anti-woke movements conceptualize 'political' content in media, and how their conceptions of politics are used to bolster and reinforce right-wing opinions. Through analysis of two Reddit threads, we can see how the narrative about SBI evolves and how gamers conceptualize the way that 'political' themes and representation are manifested within video games. For anti-woke gamers, games are not inherently political, and thus they are *made* political. I argue that anti-woke gamers conceptualize politics as an imposition, something that undermines quality *inherently.* Thus, it must be tied to outside, malicious conspiracy against the presumed white male gamer.

Methodology

The main texts I am analyzing in this paper are two Reddit threads. The first is titled: "Have you felt as though that games have been written by the same exact people for the past few years? That's because they have been, meet 'Sweet Baby Inc.', an ESG focused company in Canada." (MrCalac123 2023) and was posted on Gamergate subreddit r/KotakuInAction. The second, "What's going on with the Sweet Baby Inc Controversy?" (Finnikk 2024) was posted on the general user subreddit r/OutOfTheLoop. Reddit has historically been an organizing space for a

number of right-wing backlashes, including Gamergate. The platform's construction and decentralized moderation structure enabled and shaped Gamergate, with that style of online campaign remaining entwined with the website (Massanari 2017). I have also examined the Steam Curator page 'Sweet Baby Inc. Detected' and used two media articles on the topic: "Sweet Baby Inc. Doesn't Do What Some Gamers Think It Does" by Alyssa Mercante at Kotaku (Mercante 2024) and "How A Small Video Game Narrative Studio Wound Up At The Heart Of A Massive, Anti-Woke Conspiracy Theory" by Nathan Grayson at Aftermath (Grayson 2024). These additional sources provide further context and commentary on the wider movement outside of Reddit, as well as the motivating factors for those posting about the conspiracy on Reddit.

Ideological Gestation

The r/KotakuInAction post dates to October 26 of 2023, predating the wider backlash to SBI by about four months. The text of the post read "Every triple-A American game studio has been outsourcing their game writing to this shitty ESG obsessed company, who sanitizes and 'diversifies' games to be more "progressive". This explains sooooooooo much…" referring to SBI (MrCalac123 2023). The title and text both reference 'ESG,' an initialism for Equality, Sustainability, and Governance[1] (Grayson 2024). The post was accompanied by a screenshot of a 4chan thread that examined the company and its presence in the credits of other video games. r/KotakuInAction offers a useful case study for the culture of anti-woke gamers, as it was founded during Gamergate and was an organizing space for the harassment campaigns (Mortensen 2018). Its culture has developed directly from that period and is a sort of living fossil for Gamergate-era mentalities and

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[1] A management style adopted by certain corporations and encouraged by some financial investment firms. The style focuses on obtaining certain goals often related to social and environmental justice, such as equal opportunity employment (Grayson, 2024).

politics. So, what do the ideological heirs of the most impactful gaming backlash in history think about SBI?

Immediately notable is the theorization on what role SBI played in specific projects, especially *Alan Wake 2*. In fact, there was a *specific* action users imagined SBI took: "Wouldn't be suprised[*sic*] if they were the ones who encouraged Remedy to recast Saga Anderson as a black woman and make half of Alan Wake 2 about her arc" (dandrixxx, October 26, 2023, 8:49 p.m., comment on MrCalc123 2023). Another user imagines the conversation that SBI had with the writers of the game:

> ok, y'all didn't give us much to work with to enhance this game, but after working with your writers for eight months, we finally came up with a perfect update to the story. We replace this gruff, complex and nuanced FBI agent character with... A BLACK WOMAN!!! (KnikTheNife, October 26, 2023, 8:06 p.m., comment on MrCalc123 2023)

A common tactic of anti-woke movements is to make social justice positions inherently abnormal and alien to society, something from *outside* (Cammaerts 2022). However, the comments demonstrates that on r/KotakuInAction this kind of rhetoric has escalated to the presence of non- white women in general. The presence of a Black woman in the game, for r/KotakuInAction, is inherently foreign and imposed. This specific element would become a main talking point when the SBI scandal breached into the mainstream gamer consciousness, with the CEO of Remedy Entertainment, the developers of the game, having to state that this was not the case (Grayson 2024). The 'gruff, complex and nuanced' character that is imagined never existed, was never something that could be replaced. Despite this, SBI conspiracists felt that this was something *taken,* that the white (presumably male) version of the character *would* have been better and was made worse because

of 'forced diversity'. Other commenters look at the people behind SBI, trying to tie the identities and histories of its leadership to the conspiracy they identify as driving the inclusion of content they oppose.

> The CEO of said company is a racist+sexist leftist POC that somehow landed a writing gig at Ubisoft [...] She was promoted during the first great DEI wave following the Baltimore/BLM protests of 2015. She wrote for less than 3 years before leaving and becoming a "narrative" consultant that somehow gets contracted to shape the narrative of some of the biggest AAA² titles... She doesn't like games and she's unqualified for the job […] she got rich by being given the chance to destroy your hobby with her deranged world view. (Dismal-Range1678, October 26, 2023, 7:31 p.m., comment on MrCalc123 2023)

Anti-woke crusaders often work to disconnect the work of people they consider "woke" from legitimate claims of oppression and discrimination (Davies & MacRae 2023). This approach can readily be seen here, where the anti-racist cultural moment of BLM is used to find the motivating factor for an 'unqualified' figure to enter the industry. The focus on how gaming is under threat, that this figure 'hates games' and is trying to 'destroy the hobby' also speaks to how gamers imagine the hobby as threatened by outside forces. Scholarship on Incels, another Reddit-entwined movement, has examined how its adherents conceptualize anti-feminism as emancipatory, perceiving feminist movements as already hegemonic and oppressive (Price 2024). Part of this is the phenomena of incels struggling to

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² AAA is a term used in the games industry and fandom to denote games made by mainstream studios with large budgets. There are no universally accepted criteria for what qualifies as AAA, with the label denoting more of an intangible but present quality associated with these studios and games.

perceive women as human, seeing them only as agents of their imagined feminist hegemony. We can see this same kind of thinking in this comment, where a woman of colour is only understood in terms of "diversity hire". The logic flows from the pre-established conclusion that these inclusions are corrosive: SBI must hate games because they are ruining games by adding content that makes games worse.

Overall, the thread is full of comments that invoke a myriad of anti-woke tropes and grievances: DEI (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion), ESG, Social Justice Warriors, and citing Anita Sarkeesian as a sinister figure a decade after Gamergate. Even conspiracies that are outside of the general anti-woke content sphere, like Pizzagate, are discussed in the thread, demonstrating the ties of this movement to wider far right conspiracism (Bleakley 2023). It's easy to understand and dismiss this thread and the r/KotakuInAction subreddit as a whole as simply the impulse of hateful ideology, fundamentally opposed to diversity on principle. However, this view obfuscates the mechanisms that motivate posters against SBI. Hatred as a model for understanding the right-wing often reduces into nebulous, undefined conceptions that struggle to identify where movements and ideologies originate (Tetrault 2021). While hate undeniably plays a part in these kinds of backlashes, the adherents do not understand themselves as being motivated by hate. We can see from the examples that, instead of deriding the content on the merits of its content, the commenters are focused more on the motivations of SBI, how its acts as a mechanism to undermine their vision of games and what games culture should be.

Breaching the Surface

It is useful, before going into the next thread, to briefly look at the way that the SBI scandal played out. On February 2nd, 2024, *Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League* released, to widespread disappointment due to its flawed live-service design, monetization, and narrative choices that it made, especially regarding characters in

the much-beloved *Arkham* game series. Shortly thereafter, a Steam Curator[3] emerged that began cataloging games that were worked on by SBI, tagging them as 'not recommended'. This spiraled into a wider backlash when employees of SBI tried to get the Steam Curator removed out of fears of harassment, causing the anti-woke cadre to claim persecution and verification of the censorious nature of SBI (Mercante 2024). It is in this moment where SBI moved from a niche conspiracy theory for anti-woke gamers, into something that was being argued in more public spheres and by more high-profile creators such as popular Youtubers SomeOrdinaryGamers and Asmongold (Grayson 2024; Mercante 2024). It was into this context r/OutOfTheLoop thread was posted on March 6th, 2024, posted by a user seeking to try and understand the sudden outburst in discourse and conflict around the company:

> I'm not really into the AAA gaming sphere. The most I play are Indie games, but I've been hearing a lot of drama about Sweet Baby Inc, and even saw some people calling it GamerGate2.0. I'm just so confused about what it's about, though, it's probably obvious and I'm just stupid. (Finnikk 2024)

Posted at the height of the scandal, the thread thus acts as a strong example of how these narratives were crystallized. Here, instead of theorizing as to the evils of SBI, users who are proponents of the SBI conspiracy theory are trying to argue for its validity in the mainstream. Unlike the r/KotakuInAction thread, there are many people who are trying to resist the narratives of post-Gamergate gamers. Here, we can witness those who subscribe to the conspiracy theories about SBI try and present their ideas in forms that seem reasonable to audiences that are not already

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[3] Steam is a popular online storefront and social service for PC games, and allows users to create Curator profiles to evaluate and highlight games for a public audience

within the sphere. One of the big parts of these arguments was arguing that the reaction SBI had to the "SBI Detected" Steam Curator was unwarranted. One argument, repeated by multiple people, was that the curator was simply pointing out what games were worked on by SBI so that gamers could make informed choices about the media they were consuming. The fact that the Steam Curator was explicitly marking games with 'Not Recommended' was something pointed out by opponents to the conspiracy, and swiftly dismissed by its proponents (Steam has an 'informational' category for curators to provide commentary without rating). Instead, anti-woke commenters pivoted to arguing that 'curators are allowed to have opinions'. The argument that the identification of games that were worked on by SBI is not harmful is core to the mentality of anti-woke gamers: they have a *right* to know and that right cannot itself be harmful. Transparency is often depicted as something politically neutral, or even always beneficial, being in the interests of the nebulous "public" (Willmott 2020). However, as noted, this argument of transparency and consumer rights was swiftly contested when it was argued in a more hostile space, seeing anti-woke proponents need to pivot. Another recurring theme in the anti-SBI comments are attempts to divert from the idea that bigotry is the driver of the backlash. This can be seen in the following comment:

> People aren't against this because they are all bigots. That's just an easy cop out. People are against it because they've spent years now seeing a direct correlation between the unsubtle, in your face diversity politics in media, and its general low quality, and they are tired of it. (Zaando, March 15, 2024, 7:26 a.m., comment on Finnikk 2024)

The comment focuses on the low quality of games, and several comments follow a similar trend. Often, anti-SBI posters and posters sympathetic to the anti-

SBI position would cite a number of high-profile flop releases and poor products being tied to SBI, casting the negative reaction to the company as motivated by a pattern. This, however, is false. As we saw with the responses to the r/KotakuInAction thread, games that SBI worked on were targeted. The manifestation of the SBI backlash within a wider sphere of gaming discourse resulted directly from a *specific* low-quality release, that of *Suicide Squad*. Many of the other games that SBI worked on, such as *Alan Wake 2,* were great critical and commercial successes, and despite attempts to build controversies out of those games, such narratives did not catch on (Mercante 2024). It was necessary for a game that did not meet general quality standards among gamers to emerge as a wedge issue, but once that game emerged it was possible for anti-woke gamers to recontextualize the entire catalog of games SBI worked on as inherently tainted and poor quality. These are placed into conversation with games like Palworld and Helldivers 2, recent releases that are from studios that do not fit into the traditional AAA style (despite these releases still being funded and published by massive companies like Sony). The core of the anti-woke gamer argument's core grievances and deflections is summed up in the following comment (responding to the top of the thread):

> Answer: Because people are waking up to what SBI is. They force agenda and diversity into games. I mean they have people who defend them and say things like You can't be racist against White people. (Powerful_Ad_4233 2024, March 10, 2024, 2:35 a.m., comment on Finnikk 2024)

Much of the anti-woke movement finds its thrust by constructing working class identity as fundamentally white and thus fundamentally threatened by measures that challenge white supremacy (Davies and MacRae 2023). We see a similar

phenomenon here, where instead of the working-class identity being fundamentally white, it is *gamers* who are fundamentally white and men. Games are already serving their primary audience, cisgender heterosexual white men, and there is no need to expand gaming's appeal into different groups and experiences. Because of this, the diversity witnessed in games cannot be natural. It must be the result of an agenda, a scheme that is subsequently entwined with a wider culture war. This leads to the development of an identity that is under attack for being gamers and for being white. Antisemitic 'Cultural Marxist' and anti-woke conspiracies often dovetail, with a fundamental 'Them' being the party to institute things like anti-white racism and the fall of Western civilization (Black et al. 2024). These discourses can be seen here with the commenter bringing up the "forcing" of diversity in one breath and linking it to racism against white people with the next.

Conclusion

Politics are always entwined with culture, and as the culture of the internet is the culture of video games, the politics of the internet is the politics of video gamers. Gamergate was a site of innovation for how right-wing discourses could resist progressive themes and the presence of diverse peoples in media as a whole. Gaming-focused backlashes often mirror or foreshadow wider culture-war issues, such as the broader anti-woke movement. Looking at the SBI backlash, we can understand that any politics that cannot understand the *reasons* inherently collapses into conspiracy. It is not only a hate-fueled attack against nor a revanchist backlash against a changing culture, though those elements absolutely play a role. Instead, it speaks to a fundamental incomprehension of why social justice policies should exist and an alternative epistemology as to why the landscape of gaming is changing. It *must* be conspiracy, because why else would one insert policies that make games "worse"? Things were *good* so why do they need to change? What SBI actually does is immaterial to the role they must play in the ecosystem.

As of mid-2024, this backlash has reduced in scale but continues to simmer underneath the public gamer consciousness. Conspiracies often carry long afterlives and become canonical points for broader narratives even after they fade from the limelight (Bleakley 2023). It seems likely that SBI will be incorporated into the canon of woke institutions ruining gaming, cited over and over alongside the names of people like Anita Sarkeesian or Kotaku. Nothing that has occurred with SBI is new*,* and the discourses that fuelled the backlash against the company are reflections of wider culture war issues and age-old tactics. These all lead to a particular conception of politics, where anything that can be construed as "diverse" is "political," and the ways that politics are played out in the world, one where it is *imposed* into culture by insincere actors. When an incident such as the SBI backlash occurs again, exploiting another bout of grievances (in gaming or any related culture sphere) it is important to recognise this playbook, and how it can be used in concert with other ideas to shut certain people and perspectives out of culture. We should not allow the paranoid impulses of the anti-woke to impose their vision of gaming onto us.

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Algorithms of Mass Destruction

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Abstract

The genocide in Gaza has been widely witnessed on social media, where the rapid dissemination of news and the rise of social activism have left many unsure of where to turn for accurate information. This paper critically examines the role of propaganda and dataism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, focusing on how social media platforms contribute to the dehumanization of Palestinian civilians. Drawing on autoethnographic insights from Instagram, the paper explores symbolic violence and the construction of narratives that essentialize and marginalize Palestinian identities, leading to compassion fatigue among global audiences. The analysis underscores the dual role of social media as both a tool for resistance and a mechanism of oppression within a broader techno-capitalist framework, highlighting the complexities of digital activism in the context of colonial violence.

Keywords: Propaganda, datism, compassion fatigue, techno-capitalism

AS OF EARLY AUGUST OF 2024, Al Jazeera reports that the Israeli government has murdered at least 40,000 Palestinian civilians, the majority of whom (16,500) are children (AJLabs 2024), and has displaced 1.9 million civilians (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.). Many of the uncounted Palestinian civilians remain under the rubble, with even more missing and taken as hostages by the IDF. These attacks on Palestinian civilians are part of a long and excruciating history of settler colonialism that has displaced millions of Palestinians from their homes for nearly a century. Most media sources, however, remain mainly concerned with the aftermath of the Hamas-led October 7th attack against Israeli citizens. This analysis will proceed with the recognition that the Israeli government has been forcing Jewish settlements on Palestinian lands, enacted an apartheid state, limited access to humanitarian aid in Gaza and the West Bank, set up multiple checkpoints to surveil and manage the Palestinian population, and led numerous military operations resulting in the deaths of countless Palestinian lives, all of which has been reduced to the metaphor of 'mowing the lawn' in Israeli discourses over the past 75 years (Chomsky and Pappe 2015).

After the October 7th attack on Israeli civilians, the Israeli government retaliated with a wave of airstrikes and by opening fire on innocent Palestinian civilians in Gaza, justifying this as an effort to exterminate Hamas. Since October 7th, social media platforms have been employed by both sides as tools for resistance as well as instruments of dehumanization. This paper explores how propaganda is used to essentialize and dehumanize Palestinian civilians. I explore the role of dataism in reducing individuals to faceless statistics, and the resulting compassion fatigue that diminishes social media users' empathy. Additionally, I aim to critically examine the positionality of social media within the broader framework of techno-capitalism, highlighting the biases of and limitations within these platforms.

Symbolic Violence and Propaganda:

In a lecture at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver on November 15, 2023, Safiya Noble discussed the emergence of "propaganda wars" through the mediation of the internet and social media platforms. In this context, propaganda refers to the essentializing, authenticating, and othering narratives deployed by the Israeli government against Palestinian civilians (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreis 2021). These propaganda wars use seemingly innocuous language and imagery to dehumanize and mislead the online public, creating a divisive 'us versus them' mentality.

Following October 7th, various news organizations and world leaders framed the conflict in terms of 'Hamas/Israel.' This language, originating from the IDF's official website, has been adopted by 'neutral' Western news sources. For example, The New York Times posted a seemingly 'neutral' article titled *"Israel-Gaza Fighting Flares for a Second Day"* in which the media outlet used language like 'Islamic militants', 'jihad' and 'misfired rockets' to narrativize 'Israel's right to defend itself'(Baroud 2024). This is a strategic form of propaganda that shifts the narrative away from the loss of innocent lives in Palestine and instead justifies the Israeli government's actions as necessary anti-terrorist measures. Such language not only embodies symbolic violence but also represents a mobilization of political language against Palestinians (Bourdieu 1984). It works to "reinforce the deep distrust—not incompatible with an equally deep form of recognition—which the dominated feel towards political language," fostering a sense of helplessness and apathy among the public (Bourdieu 1984, 464–65). This 'neutral' political language, broadcasted by news organizations, echoed by politicians, and amplified on social media, serves to essentialize all Palestinians as Hamas, rendering Palestinian civilians as a homogenous, dangerous group and thereby justifying the inhumane acts committed against them. These descriptions of Palestinians as illustrated below

aim to strip away their individuality by associating their identity with violence and weapons, thereby reinforcing a sense of facelessness.

Figure 1. Propaganda images posted by the Israeli Defence Force X account (@IDF, December 1, 2023).

The IDF's use of propaganda on their X (formerly Twitter) page further illustrates this manipulation. For example, fig. 1 above contrasts an Israeli child with an adult Palestinian woman. The deliberate association of the Palestinian woman with weapons reinforces her facelessness, reduces her identity to a terrorist combatant and as someone who is violent towards Israelis, further preventing the audience from empathizing with her. This intentional dehumanization through visual rhetoric makes her, and by extension all Palestinians, easier to other and essentialize as threats. The stark color schemes and selected images (a bike vs. a bomb) are meticulously chosen to deepen the narratives of Palestinian culpability and Israeli victimhood. This image exemplifies how propaganda operates, creating and disseminating harmful, dehumanizing narratives (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreis 2021).

While social media platforms like Instagram have facilitated the global spread of dehumanizing narratives such as the ones highlighted above, they have also played

a significant role in shaping global reactions and mobilizing social movements in support of Palestine. These movements are often inspired by Palestinian journalists and activists who risk their lives daily to humanize Palestinians and remind the world of their names and faces. While Instagram did not create these movements, it provided the infrastructure that facilitated their organization and spread (Rodineliussen 2019, 240).

However, it is crucial to critically examine the positionality of social media within techno-capital. These platforms are not neutral; their algorithms are highly biased, often reflecting the interests of the corporations that control them. For instance, Human Rights Watch reported that Meta's policies and practices have been censoring Palestinian voices. Content related to Palestine has been suppressed under flawed policies such as Dangerous Organizations and Individuals (DOI), which unfairly categorize Palestinian context as violent (Brown and Younes 2023). Additionally, the IDF's AI system, 'Lavender,' has been used to identify airstrike targets through WhatsApp contacts (Middle East Monitor 2024). These examples highlight how tech giants like Meta are far from unbiased, and their platforms, influenced by these biases, can perpetuate the very injustices they claim to be neutral towards. While social media has undeniably facilitated activism, it is also embedded within a broader techno-capitalist framework that can undermine and censor the very movements it helps to amplify.

Counter-Narratives, Dataism, and Resistance

Social media has played a significant role in mobilizing global protests for Palestine, with Palestinian journalists and activists using these platforms to bring attention to the realities on the ground. Journalists like Motaz (@motaz_azaiza) and Motasem (@motasem.mortaja) have used their Instagram platforms to share personal stories and document the violence against Palestinian civilians. Their work

goes beyond mere reporting; it fosters a deep connection between the international community and the Palestinian people, cultivating compassion and reinforcing Palestinian identity on social media. Organizations like "We Are Not Numbers," a Palestine-based initiative, have further amplified these efforts by creating profiles of those lost in the conflict. They, along with media outlets like B'Tselem (2024), Al Jazeera (Haddad and Antonopoulos 2023), and The Washington Post (Mellen, Galocha, and Ledur 2023), work to share the stories behind the statistics, putting faces to the numbers seen on Instagram. These narratives challenge the dehumanization that occurs when individuals are reduced to mere figures.

However, it is essential to recognize that numbers and statistics are also tools used by the IDF and the Israeli government to generate propaganda within a colonial framework. Numbers are used to dehumanize Palestinians, rendering them faceless and desensitizing the public to their suffering. Numbers are employed to dehumanize Palestinians, rendering them faceless entities and desensitizing the public to their suffering. As Elia Zureik (2010) highlights, the collection of statistics within the Palestinian population reflects power imbalances, often with Palestinians not being the ones producing these figures. A striking example occurred on July 24, 2024, when Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, addressed Congress in Washington. He stated, "I asked the commander there [in Rafah], 'how many terrorists did you take out in Rafah?' He gave me an exact number: 1,203. I asked him, 'how many civilians were killed?' He said, 'Prime Minister, practically none.'" This quote illustrates how the Israeli government carefully selects and presents numbers to shape public perception. Netanyahu's emphasis on the number of "terrorists" killed, while falsely claiming no civilian casualties, highlights how statistics are manipulated to create specific narratives about Palestinians. As Zureik notes, "counting the Palestinians becomes a political act laden with controversy [...] depending on who does the counting" (Zureik 2019).

Following the October 7th attacks, numbers have taken on a life of their own on social media, with big, bolded statistics dominating the narrative. While it is crucial to remember the lives lost, constant exposure to quantitative data like death tolls can have a numbing effect. Numbers alone do not convey the lived experiences behind them; they reduce real people to statistics and only further dehumanize them. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of dataism, defined as "a widespread belief in the objective quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of human behavior and sociality" (Fors et al. 2020, 25). Dataism strips numbers of context while smoothing over and erasing the stories behind them. When applied to human narratives, dataism reduces the complexity of the Palestinian experience to mere statistics, overlooking the fact that these numbers represent real people with families, culture, and identity. This quantification instills a sense of facelessness, embedding a false sense of objectivity into knowledge systems that render individuals commensurable and legible within settler colonial frameworks (Willmott 2023).

In this context, the practice of dataism, when discussing Palestinian casualties, produces what I term 'conversation-stopping narratives.' These narratives arise when users repost numbers without engaging with the human realities beneath them. Dataism functions as a conversation-stopping narrative because it often leads to "compassion fatigue" (Moeller 1999), where people become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data and stop discussing the underlying issues. Instead of focusing on the people who have died and their stories, the conversation shifts solely to the numbers, effectively silencing deeper discussions about the human cost of the conflict. Thus, while Palestinian activists and journalists work to humanize the numbers and tell the stories behind them, the pervasive influence of dataism inadvertently contributes to the very dehumanization they seek to resist.

Post-October 7th, my Instagram feed filled with images and reports from Gaza, many shared by journalists risking their lives to document the unfolding crisis. As the situation worsened and journalists were targeted or forced to evacuate, civilians took it upon themselves to capture and share what was happening. Amid waves of compassion fatigue and as people began to post and talk less about Gaza, these civilians urged the online community not to remain silent. Compassion Fatigue, a term coined by Susan D. Moeller (1999) in *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sells Disease, Famine, War, and Death*, refers to the public's diminishing emotional response to humanitarian crises due to overexposure. I witnessed this firsthand on Instagram, where Palestinian civilians, including those in desperate situations, posted pleas for visibility and support, resisting the algorithms that sought to filter out their voices. For example:

- "I will not forgive anyone who watches this video without sharing it. I am Khamis from Gaza. You can help me and my family by donating. Donation link is in bio. Share this video. Like and comment." (@khames._mahmoud, July 28, 2024)

- "For 5 seconds, watch this video if you care about us in Gaza. If you can watch it till the end, I know you want to help us. Please press the buttons you see on the screen to save me and my family." (@musbah.family11, June 12, 2024)

- "Please don't skip this video. We are so tired. Please help my family survive this war. Watch this video and donate if you can. The link is in my bio." (@m0taz_family, August 6, 2024)

- "Please stop. We know that you are tired of watching videos like this, asking you not to skip them. But what other option do we have? My father and sister are infected. We lost our house and now we have no

income. Please help us by liking, sharing, commenting, and donating if possible." (@ziad.alhindawi.family, August 3, 2024)

After the attacks on October 7th, social media, particularly Instagram, was flooded with real-time coverage from Palestinian journalists and civilians. Initially, the online world seemed to engage actively, but as the crisis prolonged, interest waned, and posts became less frequent. This decline in engagement is something I observed on my own Instagram feed. The diminishing emotional response, exacerbated by the constant stream of brutal images and overwhelming casualty statistics, speaks to compassion fatigue. The repetitive exposure to these numbers and images can numb people and reduce their ability to empathize. Numbers alone, detached from the human experiences they represent, contribute to this desensitization and render real people as faceless statistics.

Compassion fatigue also results from the sheer volume of crises happening simultaneously, which overwhelms the public's capacity to engage with all of them. In the context of Palestine, the prolonged nature of the conflict, combined with explicit and gruesome images, pushes many to retreat to ignorance as a form of self-preservation. As Moeller (1999) notes, "Didactic images can overload the senses. A single child at risk commands our attention and prompts our action. But one child, and then another, and another, and on and on is too much. A crowd of people in danger is faceless. Numbers alone can numb."

Journalists in Palestine have observed this compassion fatigue within international audiences. For example, Yara Eid, a prominent Palestinian activist and journalist, recently posted, "It seems like the world got tired of us being murdered: we're seeing fewer social media posts, less coverage globally. Since day one, this has been Israel's goal. To make us all fatigued and used to their war crimes. But Palestinians are still being slaughtered every day… we need you to call for an end to this genocide; we still need you to fight for us!" (@eid_yara, Nov 21, 2023). The

world is gradually becoming desensitized to the Palestinian cause, bombarded with faceless numbers that make it easier to forget that real human beings are suffering on the ground. This dataism-caused facelessness reinforces the dehumanization of Palestinians, making it harder for the public to maintain empathy and engagement.

Conclusion

The intersection of social media, propaganda, and dataism has profoundly influenced global perceptions of the Palestinian genocide. While platforms like Instagram enable the spread of counter-narratives and help humanize the victims, they are also embedded within a techno-capitalist framework that can undermine these efforts. The influence of biased algorithms and the dehumanization inherent in dataism contribute to compassion fatigue, making it easier for the global audience to become desensitized to the ongoing suffering in Palestine. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing the power and limitations of social media in shaping public discourse. After 10 months, the genocide in Gaza continues, with Palestinians losing their lives, families, and homes while Instagram users watch from their phones. This reality underscores the importance of our digital footprints and serves as a reminder not to become desensitized or stop posting in the face of mass cruelty and compassion fatigue.
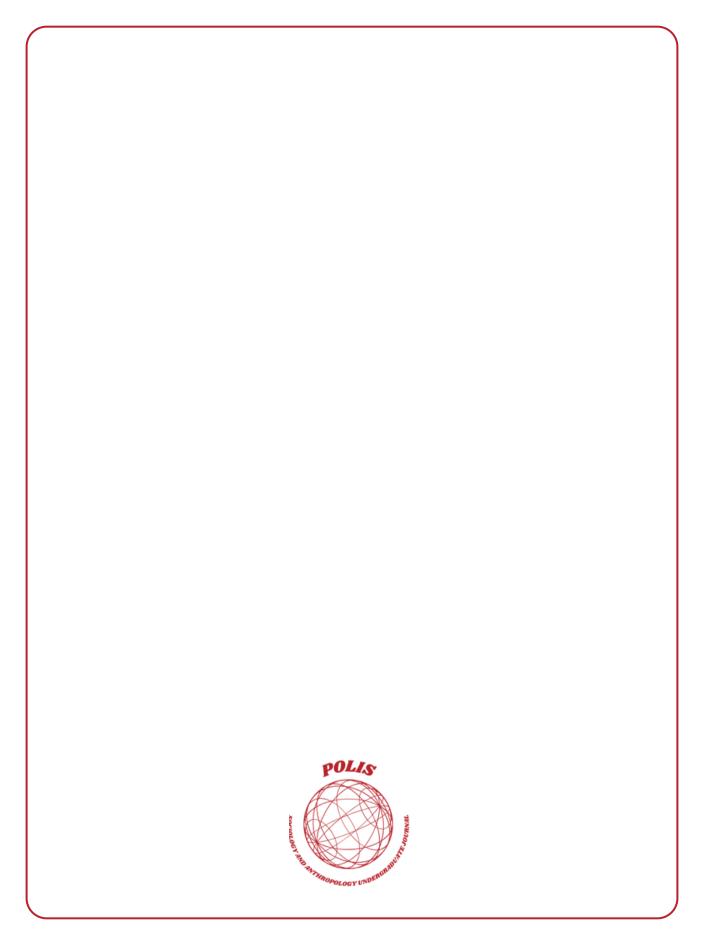
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