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Running Head: THE COMFORT WATCH

THE COMFORT WATCH: PSYCHOLOGY AND MEDIA THEORY PERSPECTIVES ON  
NOSTALGIA AND FILM

by

SOHNI KAUR

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF  
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PROFESSOR TALMOR  
PROFESSOR MA

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## Introduction

As a global pandemic ravaged every country in the world, communities began to endure a collective trauma. Communities and individuals alike needed to find ways to cope with these new stressors that became a part of daily life. For many, a pandemic was the most stressful thing in their lives so far. Across social media and through personal conversations, I noticed an uptick in the number of people once again consuming media, whether it be film, television, or music, from their past. Many spoke about how they started listening to their favorite band from when they were 14 or rewatching a show that ended five years ago. Many, including myself, revisited old films. Variety magazine reports that Disney+ – a hub for nostalgic content – subscribers passed the 73 million mark, well surpassing predictions for its first year, in which a global pandemic took place during eight of the twelve months (Low, 2020). The rise of large underlying stressors as well as the surge in media content has led to film as a source of comfort in an increasingly uncertain world. The use of “comfort watches” as a coping mechanism is something that many people engage in (often times unconsciously), yet it is rarely studied. In fact, there is no definition of the comfort watch within the academic realm.

The “comfort watch” (used interchangeably with comfort film or comfort movie), is a term I wish to define as any film that provides a sense of safety and security by distracting the viewer from unpleasant emotions or situations. Comfort films are there for us when we are at our most weary and provide a sense of much needed happiness in whatever way we see fit. There are no set genres or filmic tropes that construct a comfort film; the viewer decides what is comforting and what is not. This makes it difficult to assign them into a singular category, however, there are some common motifs. One of the most consistent factors of the comfort film is the evocation of nostalgia or sentimentality. The *nostalgic film* takes the viewer back to a time

they wish to revisit because it gives them joy. The viewer is often nostalgic for a simpler time, one that distracts them from whatever troubles they have in the present moment, and often resorts to film for that escapism.

Within the nostalgic film, there is a subcategory of the *guilty pleasure film*. This film is a “lowbrow” or “low culture” film that is often not in the realm of academic or critical acclaim. Subsections of guilty pleasures, particularly those geared towards women, make the viewer feel young again. The content is often infantilizing, sometimes because it is meant for children and sometimes because it is usually not taken seriously, allowing the viewer to ‘turn their brain off’ for approximately 90 minutes. Regardless of the method, guilty pleasures return the viewer to a younger mindset, which nostalgia often relies on. In fact, the categories overlap so frequently, that comfort and nostalgia are arguably gendered female.

This thesis will explore nostalgia in film and what about it is so comforting. The concept of comfort watches spans a broad category of film, which is why it is imperative to analyze various examples. Films were selected after analyzing over 300 lists on Letterboxd, a social film network and review aggregate website. After searching the term “comfort watches”, films that came up repeatedly were *Paddington* (2014) dir. Paul King and *Twilight* (2008) dir. Catherine Hardwicke. Although many comfort films are often considered to be lowbrow, Wes Anderson’s work sits within highbrow culture, and it is still comforting. Several Letterboxd lists entitled “comfort watches” included multiple of his films, specifically *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) dir. Wes Anderson and *Moonrise Kingdom* (2012) dir. Wes Anderson. These films have been released within the past decade, yet still evoke nostalgia due to their aesthetics.

As stated above, research to find example texts for this thesis was done on Letterboxd.com. The creators of the website describe it as a “global social network for grass-

roots film discussion and discovery” (Letterboxd, n.d.). One of the key features of the website is the ability to create user generated lists. The majority of the users creating these lists are not professionals or academics, but simply cinephiles. One list created by user “izzy” entitled “Comfort Movies” consists of 117 movies and has garnered over 16,000 likes and includes all of the movies listed above, barring *Twilight* (izzy, n.d.). In fact, many of these user generated lists have acknowledgments that note that the creator has chosen these films because they evoke a nostalgic feeling, such as one that states, “Films that are comforting to watch for whatever reason maybe nostalgia or something” (Emma, n.d.). Despite the fact that nostalgic movies were overwhelmingly included in these lists, so were other types of comfort films. Therefore, animated movies and musicals, although often comforting, will be excluded as there are various other aspects of these films that contribute to their status as comfort watches that extend beyond the breadth of this thesis. Furthermore, this thesis will touch on guilty pleasures, but only as they relate to nostalgia, and will not analyze contemporary guilty pleasures that may also provide comfort for the same reasons as listed above.

Because the comfort film has roots in multiple fields, including psychology, it is important to investigate it from various angles. A large breadth of psychological research has been conducted on the concepts of nostalgia, media, stress, and, coping individually, but rarely all together. Therefore, the psychological study will analyze nostalgia and film and their relationship to coping. A series of correlations will attempt to determine if there are associations between stress, nostalgia, comfort film usage, and other escapist coping strategies. This research is being conducted in the hope that it will further investigation into comfort films and their role in coping with stress, as there have not been any conclusive analyses thus far.

### Media Theory Analysis

*A longing for something far away, not necessarily in space, but in time* (Böhn, 2007, p. 143).

#### *Nostalgia: A Theoretical Framework*

Nostalgia, deriving from the Greek “*nostos*” meaning “homecoming” and “*algos*” meaning “pain” was originally considered to be a feeling of homesickness (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In 1905, The New International Encyclopaedia defined nostalgia as a disease that could lead to death and melancholia (as cited in Albrecht, 2007). Now, it means a wistful or sentimental yearning for the past (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As Linda Hutcheon states “time, unlike space, cannot be returned to—ever; time is irreversible. Nostalgia becomes the reaction to that sad fact.” (as cited in J. L. Wilson, 2014, p. 22). Therefore, there will never be a physical return to the past. Revisiting the memory of it becomes a poor substitute, but the only choice we have.

The first instances of nostalgia were not cited in the realm of literature or art, but in medicine in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. When soldiers went abroad to fight and when students left home to study, they were riddled by a sense of longing to return to their native land (Boym, 2007). Symptoms of nostalgia included lack of appetite, fevers, hallucinations, and even death (Niemeyer, 2014; Albrecht, 2007). Doctors attempted to cure nostalgia through various methods including the use of leeches and opium, and most notably, returning the displaced to their homeland, even if temporarily. This yielded conflicting results. Some, such as Niemeyer (2014) state that nostalgia can be cured upon returning home. However, others such as Boym (2007) state that once patients of nostalgia returned home, they died. Whatever the result or potential cure, it is widely agreed upon that nostalgia was the disease.

However, by the 1800s, nostalgia was no longer a disease restricted to soldiers. During the start of the century, increased technology such as railroads caused mass amounts of displacement. Overall increase in mechanization pointed towards a future of modernity that shirked old traditions. With society's embrace of contemporary lifestyles and technology, some were left longing for what they left behind so rapidly. This time, the ache was not for a physical return to home, but for a preindustrial era that had been extinguished at a speed that was unprecedented at the time. Europeans at the latter end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century quickly learned that the past was gone forever and had that it had to be falsely recreated. Thus, the placement of museums and monuments boomed as an attempt at restoring memories (Cross, 2017).

Decades later, in the early 1990s, German cabaret artist Uwe Steimle coined the term *ostalgie* or *ostalgia*: the longing for a time in East Germany prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. This sentiment of nostalgia for the German Democratic Party (GDR) boomed in the early 2000s after the release of *Good Bye Lenin!* (2003) dir. Wolfgang Becker (Boym, 2007). In the late 1900s and early 2000s, America experienced a nostalgia boom, opting for "old clothes, old music, old recipes, an obsessive search for family roots, an endemic concern for preservation, and the appeal of national heritage" (Reisenwitz et al., 2004, p. 56). Specifically, the turn of the century brought upon cultural anxiety at the thought of a past that was dying and a future that had yet to arrive.

Today, America has recently experienced the "reboot era" of media, which relies on nostalgia as a profitable and commodifiable concept. Mollet (2020) provides an updated view of the nostalgia boom that Reisenwitz et al. (2004) reported. Mollet (2020) argues that nostalgia is embedded in American culture, particularly in politics and media. Shows such as *Mad Men* and *Stranger Things* depict decades that have long passed, yet they are widely commercially

successful shows. This attempt to revive lost eras is “evidence of a perceived need to rewrite American history” (Molett, 2020 p. 139). The desire to return to a past America is largely due to how much has changed since. As nostalgia has most often risen during times of great adjustment and transformation, it is important to look at the relationship between nostalgia and change.

### *Nostalgia and Change*

Using nostalgia as escapism is a frequently used, if sometimes maladaptive, coping mechanism, as “the change can be so great that people are simply unable to cope with it and search, instead, for a withdrawal into an artificial world of nostalgic remembrance” (Böhn, 2007, p. 146). Nostalgia is not only an individual defense mechanism, but a collective one. Boym (2007) furthers the argument that change brings about nostalgia, claiming that “nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms and historical upheavals” (p. 10). Böhn (2007) also points out that nostalgia also depends not only on the amount of time, but on the amount of change between the past and the present. Kalinina (2016) states that nostalgia is a reaction to change, as the need to “transform the present and secure a desirable future” (p. 7). Change is difficult to come to terms with, regardless of whether it is leading to something better or worse than one’s current situation. Therefore, the stress that is caused by change is something that an individual must learn to cope with.

Change is a key element in Albrecht (2007)’s concept of solastalgia: the distress caused by environmental change. Solastalgia, originating from definitions of solace, desolation and algia (pain), is defined as “a form of homesickness when one is still at ‘home’” (Albrecht, 2007, p. 45). Boym (2007) cites multiple examples of how revolutions, destructions of past homes, resulted in an increased amount of “political and cultural manifestations of longing” (p. 10). While Albrecht (2007) states that solastalgia occurs during the physical destruction of one’s

home or homeland, the concept of change causing stress can be generalized and applied to a variety of scenarios. Albrecht himself states that “any context where place identity is challenged by pervasive change to the existing order has potential to deliver solastalgia” (Albrecht, 2007, p. 45).

### *Memory and Childhood*

Nostalgia cannot exist without memory. Whether they be personal or collective memories, they are required for nostalgia to exist. These memories may be seen as less faithful to the truth than history, but that does not negate memory’s role in the creation of nostalgia (Kalinina, 2016). Svetlana Boym (2007)’s concept of restorative and reflective nostalgia relies on the way memories are used as well. While both forms of nostalgia are a way of interpreting the past, “restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (Boym, 2007, 13). However, not all memory is nostalgic, as psychologist Krystine Batcho states “one can remember without being nostalgic, but one cannot be nostalgic without remembering” (as cited in Kalinina, 2016, p. 7). Because film is a valuable tool for the act of remembering, it helps process both nostalgic and non-nostalgic memories.

Nostalgia can often manifest itself in film, whether it is through the emotional connection to the memory of a film, or the familiar aesthetic of a bygone era. As film becomes a vessel for nostalgia, viewers grasp onto it as a way to return to whatever time they long for. Thus, the nostalgic comfort film is a return: a return to a simpler time, a return to a past self, a return to home. As Böhn (2007) mentions, there is no automatic way for humans to create a collective memory, therefore we must invent one, and so media was born. However, film functions not only as a collective memory, but an individual one. The memories we create through the film-watching experience stay with us, helping to construct our “personal biographies” (Böhn, 2007).

The longing we feel when we watch comfort films is a longing to return to a particular time period that calms and comforts us. In times of stress, this desire may grow stronger. The films themselves “have become the object of nostalgia because they are linked to so many personal memories and biographies” (Böhn, 2007, p. 146). Nostalgia functions as something that connects us both cognitively and emotionally to a past self through the creation and reflection of memories, which is ultimately what makes nostalgic films comfortable. Our favorite films from childhood often have pleasant memories attached to them: watching whatever movie was on TV on sick days at home, getting dropped off at the theater by your parents to see a new movie with friends, spending the holidays watching Christmas movies with family. These memories provide a sense of stability that no longer exists to the present-day individual. Even if the time they are nostalgic for was not perfect, in hindsight it is still preferable to the current moment. Moreover, the concept of childhood is inherently comforting. In an ideal childhood, one is taken care of and is free of significant responsibilities. Thus, even remembering the feeling of being a child by proxy feels safe and stable. Psychologists have furthered this notion and found that those who experience more nostalgia also feel more youthful, suggesting that nostalgia is a longing for youth in addition to a longing for a time (Abeyeta & Routledge, 2016). Other psychological research suggests that nostalgia can help adults “cope with the loss of an idealised childhood and innocence” (Kalinina, 2016, p. 10) By revisiting these memories, the individual can temporarily embody their past self in a more comforting setting.

### *In Media*

Nostalgia often arose from the fear of media revolutions and in response to increased social media and communication technology. The apprehension of new technology dates back to the invention of the printing press all the way up until the popularization of the television. Today,

“tech anxiety” from the overwhelming and rapid increase in new media has managed to simultaneously produce shows such as *Black Mirror* while also re-popularizing *Friends*. The 1990s is longed for because it is the last of the “pre-smart phone and pre-social media” era (Ewen, 2020, p. 576). The nostalgia for an era prior to increased communication technology is due to the fact that “network technologies have bastardized our culture” (Ewen, 2020, p. 576).

Now, media is not only the trigger for nostalgia, but the place where it manifests (Kalinina, 2016). Media is a prime habitat for nostalgia to manifest as it “mediate[s] collective and individual experiences” (Kalinina, 2016, p. 12). Instead of curing nostalgia as many anticipated, technology has inflamed “nostalgic aches” (Boym, 2007; Cross, 2015). Boym (2007) argues that technology has revived and physically brought to life entire eras that have passed by, specifically citing how technology has brought us phenomena such as visual manifestations of the sinking Titanic and fighting gladiators from centuries ago. Without technology, specifically within film, society would not be able to revisit the past with such clarity and detail, which makes the sensation of nostalgia stronger. Niemeyer (2014) concurs that new media technologies “function as platforms, projection places and tools to express nostalgia” (p. 7). Furthermore Niemeyer (2014) suggests that the increase in globalization is causing newer generations to leave their homes more frequently than in past generations, increasing nostalgia and homesickness. This, alongside the increase in new technologies contributes to a sense of *false nostalgia*: a longing for a time we have not experienced (Niemeyer, 2014).

Additionally, nostalgia no longer entirely functions as it once used to. While the standard understanding of nostalgia is still present, our ability to falsify nostalgia means that time and waiting is no longer necessary. Digital, entirely unaged images can be edited to look aged, meaning that time is no longer passing in decades, but in minutes. Furthermore, the pace of life

has increased, and fast capitalism causes trends and cultural items to cycle through at a much faster rate than ever before, creating a “modern nostalgia” (Cross, 2015). Sentimentality hits such a deep nerve and overwhelms all senses to the point that is almost impossible to resist and making it easy to commodify and capitalize on.

### *Aesthetics of Nostalgia*

Because of how nostalgia now functions in media, films that have no personal connections attached to them can still make us feel nostalgic, even if it is from an era we never experienced. Contemporary films – in this case meaning films that have come out too recently to evoke personal nostalgia – use specific aesthetics to portray a wistful image of the past that is similar to our personal memories. *Paddington* was made for a younger audience, yet it resonated with adults, perhaps even more so than children, because it mimics family films from a slightly earlier era than the current moment. Many family films from the 2010s are heavily contingent on a contemporary cultural setting, which makes it difficult for adults to form emotional bonds with them. For example, *The Emoji Movie* (2017) dir. Tony Leondis could not have existed in decades before because emojis did not exist or were not popular. However, the concept, if not the execution, of *Paddington* could have hypothetically existed in various time periods after the 1950s, and therefore resembles the types of family films adults are familiar with (Bond, 1958). *Paddington* reminds adults either of a childhood that was theirs, even if the franchise was not a key component in creating their “personal biographies” as children, or of a childhood that predates them.

### *Case Study: Wes Anderson’s Aestheticized Nostalgia*

However, in opposition to the way that films can destroy the aesthetics of nostalgia in family movies like *The Emoji Movie*, Wes Anderson, known for hyper-stylized and offbeat films,

uses specific aesthetics to transport the viewer to another time almost instantaneously. Despite the fact that *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel* were set in concrete time periods from the past (1965 and the 1930s-1980s respectively), they still evoke a sense of false nostalgia, not real nostalgia. Even if the viewer lived through the 1960s or 1980s (which certainly possible and even likely), they have never lived through the exact time period that is being shown on screen. The 20<sup>th</sup> century Anderson portrays is so uncannily stylized and symmetrical, it could have never existed, yet it does not prevent the feelings of nostalgia that arise. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* follows a man in 1985 retelling his personal biography from 1932 and 1968. As Dilley (2017) observes, the film “itself is about a man out of time, and nostalgia for an era long vanished” (Memory and Narrative). As mentioned above, longing for childhood and youth is a key factor in nostalgia as André Bolzinger defines nostalgia as a “pathology of misery”, suggesting “more the desire to be young again” rather than aching to go home (as cited in Niemeyer, 2014, p. 8).

However, it is not only the narrative, but the aesthetic choices of Anderson in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* that truly embody a nostalgic experience and manipulate temporality. Most notably is the use of three different aspect ratios within the film. As the narrative jumps from three different years (1932, 1968, and 1985) out of chronological order, the aspect ratios change alongside the story. For the segments of the film occurring in 1932, Anderson uses a 1.37:1 aspect ratio, also known as the Academy Ratio, which came about in that very year (Figure 1.1). As the narrative progresses into 1968, the aspect ratio changes to 2.35:1, which was popularized by the creation of CinemaScope in 1953 (Figure 1.2). Lastly the scene taking place in 1985 switched to 16:9 aspect ratio, popularized by the use of HDTV in 1996 (Figure 1.3) (Anderson, 2014; Pogue, 2018). The viewer is not only transported through fictional time, but real time as

well as Anderson chose (more or less) historically accurate aspect ratios to fit the era he is depicting. However, it is not purely the visitation of the past that makes the viewer feel “cured” of nostalgia. It is the fact that the viewer is allowed to bounce around in time, out of chronological order and out of the parameters of time as we understand it. Boym (2007) states that the nostalgic refuses “to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” and “feels stifled within the conventions of time and space” (p. 8, p. 9). One may argue that the same results would be achieved simply by having a non-chronological narrative and not including varying aspect ratios, however, the changing aspect ratios fully immerse the audience into the experience of time-travel. By not only travelling to the past, but *through* the past, the nostalgic can be comforted by the fact that even if time is irreversible, they can temporarily fantasize (with tangible proof provided within the images and aesthetics of the film) that they are not subjected to the confines of time and space.



*1.1: 1.37:1 ratio (Academy Ratio) used in 1932 scenes*



1.2: 2.35:1 (Cinemascope Ratio) used in 1968 scenes



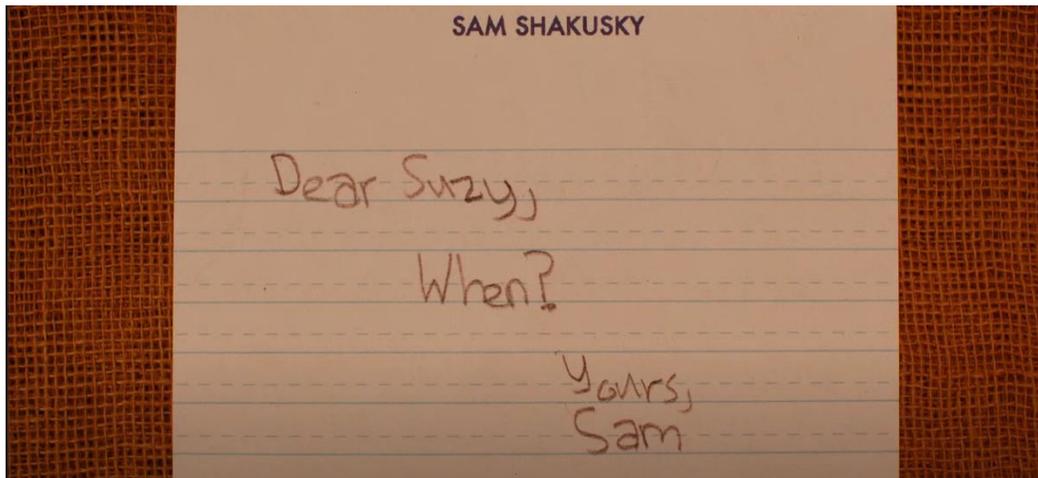
1.3: 16:9 (HDTV Ratio) used in 1985 scenes

*Moonrise Kingdom*, set in the 1960s, also uses vintage aesthetics to evoke a nostalgic feeling in the viewer through the use of tinted images and hyper-stylized period costumes and props. Color is used very carefully in film and often creates subconscious associations within the viewer's mind, particularly with moments in time. Holl (2014) states that memories triggered by colors on screen are both linked to historical and personal moments of the past, indicating that color palettes and evocations of nostalgia are connected. Additionally, warm tones specifically evoke the past because they are reminiscent of the photography from old Brownie and Polaroid cameras (Bartholeyns, 2014). In *Moonrise Kingdom*, Anderson uses a warm, sepia toned tint over the majority of the film, creating a sense of familiarity that is suggestive of the era between

the 1960s and the 1980s (Figure 2.1). In addition to the tinting of the film, the overall mise-en-scène, including props and costumes, amplifies the sense of nostalgia. Fashion nostalgia encompasses styles, patterns, and designs characteristic of a specific time period, which Anderson capitalizes on in *Moonrise Kingdom* (Cross, 2015). However, this differs from a traditional period piece, as those are often not associated with nostalgia.



2.1: A warm sepia toned shot including a vintage costume from *Moonrise Kingdom*



2.2: A shot of a letter in a child's handwriting from *Moonrise Kingdom*

One could argue that period specific costumes and props are common in all period pieces but do not evoke nostalgia; however, it is not only the vintage materials that are the source of this

sentimental feeling. The narrative itself follows children, which is reflected in the mise-en-scène as well. The two main characters, who have just started to come of age, write handwritten notes to each other (Figure 2.2). The film is a childhood fantasy and dreamland, capturing the “emotional wonder of a child, as if viewing something for the first time” (Dilley, 2017, Memory and Narrative). The innocence of childhood is something that is forever lost, but people still long to feel young again (Niemeyer, 2014). Therefore, it is a sum total of aesthetics of bygone eras and childhood centric narratives in Anderson’s films that lead to both false and real nostalgia.

### *Women, Guilt, and Nostalgia*

The term “guilty pleasure”, first used in 1860 to describe a brothel, is most commonly known as “something, such as a movie, television program, or piece of music, that one enjoys despite feeling that it is not generally held in high regard” (Szalai, 2013; Lexico, n.d.). The first associations between guilt and pleasure were due to judgement on morals, not aesthetics and culture (Szalai, 2013). Now, guilty pleasures are a widely understood subcategory of media. These guilty pleasures usually fall within the realm of lowbrow or mass culture media. The concept of lowbrow culture and guilty pleasures is furthered when applied to women’s media. This subculture is understood as a “construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view” (Kuhn, 1984, p. 18). Therefore, genres such as melodrama and soap operas understand women as a social audience because they assume they are portraying women’s desires (Kuhn, 1984). However, women’s desires are not often held in high regard, as they frequently include elements, such as nostalgia, that are scorned.

Nostalgia itself is criticized through a gendered lens. Nostalgia is stigmatized because “affect, which is paramount to nostalgic experience, is often pathologised and gendered as

feminine” (Kalinina, 2016, pg. 7). Women are considered to experience nostalgia more so than men, feminizing nostalgia, adding another layer of gendered stigmatization to nostalgic content. Not only does this affect women, but it also condemns men that encounter supposedly feminine content (Kalinina, 2016). In my research of “comfort movie” lists on Letterboxd, many films were both nostalgic and aimed at a female audience. Common films listed were, *Lady Bird* (2017) dir. Greta Gerwig, *Booksmart* (2019) dir. Olivia Wilde, and *Eighth Grade* (2018) dir. Bo Burnham. Each of these films can be categorized as female coming-of-age films that also evoke nostalgia. For the adult audience, these films are reminders of youth. Each film also follows the story of a girl or woman at a significant point of change in her life, which has been inarguably linked to nostalgia (Böhn, 2007; Boym, 2007; Kalinina, 2016). The connection between gender and adolescence is apparent in both middlebrow examples such as the ones listed above, and in lowbrow films. Female-oriented nostalgic guilty pleasures often include infantilized content or are aimed at adolescent audience. Popular examples of lowbrow, female adolescent oriented “comfort films” such as *The Princess Diaries* (2001) dir. Garry Marshall, assume their audiences are both female and adolescent so much so that they become one and the same. There is certainly no lack of well received, male-oriented coming of age films, yet they were seldomly included in “comfort movie” lists, implying that they are enjoyable, but not comforting.

Despite the gendered stigmatization of nostalgia, the guilt that comes from enjoying adolescent and feminine content can still be relieved when the film is viewed through a nostalgic lens. With a combination of time passing and culture changing, an adult audience member who enjoyed the film from the start, is essentially allowed a redo. They are able to go back in time, to their younger self, and enjoy the film unabashedly. While some shame may linger, viewing the film as an adult is overwhelmingly relieving. The nostalgic audience member can relive their

ache for youth and their frustration with the confines of linear time. As Michael Kammen states, “nostalgia...is essentially history without guilt” (as cited in Boym, 2007, p. 9). Psychological research found that collective nostalgia and collective guilt were correlated, suggesting that nostalgia functions as a way to relieve guilt (Baldwin et al., 2018). While this is often a critique of nostalgia, it can also be an act of reclamation. Because women, particularly younger girls, are discredited for simply enjoying things, revisiting once shameful pleasures from a nostalgic lens can alleviate the pain of having carried guilt undeservedly. A quintessential example of this phenomenon is how *Twilight* transformed from a guilty pleasure to a nostalgic cult favorite.

*Case Study: Twilight and Gendered Nostalgia*

*Twilight*, a fantastical love story between a 17-year-old human and a 108-year-old vampire, started its life as a wildly successful guilty pleasure only to turn into a nostalgic cultural artifact a decade later. The “*Twilight* renaissance” began on the first film’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2018, only to be compounded when the author of the series, Stephanie Meyer, announced the release of another book in the spring of 2020 (Peterson, 2019; Meyer, 2020). Meyer (2020) herself reminisced on how much time had passed and how much she had changed since the start of the cultural phenomenon 15 years prior, asking her audience “We had a lot of fun, didn’t we?”.

However, *Twilight*’s shift to a nostalgic work is not only reliant on the time passed between its release and the present moment, but because of how the film itself was received. The film is widely understood to be “for girls” or “for teenagers”. Bode (2010) states that the critical reception of the first *Twilight* film “repeatedly mobilizes an idea of its audience that is not just female but adolescent” (p. 707). In the same way that *Paddington* is comforting because it is reminiscent of childhood, *Twilight* is reminiscent of adolescence, an equally nostalgic time,

particularly to those who just left it. Watching this infantilized content as a now adult brings upon “memories of a feeling of the heightened hormonal awareness and emotional fog of adolescent longing” (Bode, 2010, p. 708). However, this argument could be made for any nostalgic film, regardless of its “guilty pleasure” status. What distinguishes guilty pleasure nostalgic films from the rest is the shame that comes with enjoying the film the first time around. Rotten Tomatoes’ “Tomatometer-approved” critic Richard Knight asks, “who else but a hormonal teenager would appreciate this lovesick nonsense?” (as cited in Bode, 2010, p.715). The primary audience of *Twilight* is criticized simply for being young and enjoying content for young people. It is “guilty” because it is adolescent: its stories, the characters’ feelings and problems all point to an overwhelming yet simpler time in a person’s life.

In addition to its adolescence being a fault, so is its intention to provide for a female audience. Bode (2010) states “the teen girl audience taints the film, and the film taints the girl, and both are to be reviled” (p. 708). The films and the books alike have been attacked as they fit into the category of “chick-flicks” and other female oriented media. Other popular film and literature phenomena aimed at young adults did not receive the same vitriol as *Twilight* because they were interpreted as appealing to a “cross-gender” audience. However, *Twilight* was deemed too feminine for any authentic critical reception (N. Wilson, 2014). Catherine Hardwicke, the director of the first film, was replaced by male directors for the subsequent four films, despite breaking the record for biggest opening for a solo female director and managing to double the amount of the film’s budget within three days of opening (Carroll, 2008; N. Wilson, 2014). After being surrounded by so much criticism of the genre itself, the young female audience is aware that they should feel remorse for enjoying or even engaging with content aimed specifically at them. Culture writer Constance Grady (2018) admits “this was a franchise built for teen girls,

marketed to teen girls, and loved by teen girls, and because of that, it became accepted common knowledge that all correct-thinking people could only despise and revile it". This overwhelming critique colors the audience's film-watching experience with guilt and shame for being a young and female audience, which can only be rectified through the passing of time.

Today, more than a decade after *Twilight*'s explosive initial success, it is considered to be a time capsule "being emblematic of what it was like to be an adolescent in the 2000's" (Tebo, 2020). The primary audience now views it differently and revisits the franchise from a different mindset. Women now in their late 20s and early 30s admit that in 2008 they wanted to hate *Twilight* yet couldn't help but love it for reasons they did not understand. One writer who watched the film for the first time at 24 rather than as a teenager claimed that the franchise "inspired a fair amount of nostalgia" for her because it allowed her to revisit her time as teenage girl without the shame that came with it (Grady et al., 2018). Even though she did not feel nostalgic due to a personal attachment to the franchise, that nostalgia by proxy allowed her to "appreciate, rather than be embarrassed by, the romanticization" of the feelings of a teenage girl that were once invalidated (Grady et al., 2018). The ability to revisit once shameful things and no longer feel judgement is in itself comforting.

### *Critiques*

Despite the comfort that nostalgia brings, it is widely critiqued. At first, nostalgia was quite literally a disease that needed curing. Once our understanding of nostalgia increased, it was no longer considered a corporeal disease, but still an "incurable psychological condition" (Kalinina, 2016, p. 9). One of the most common critiques of nostalgia is that it is understood as "the conceptual opposite of progress" (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 919). Instead of moving forward, nostalgia is "evidence of loss of faith in the future" or anxiety over the future (Pickering

& Keightley, 2006, p. 919; Kalinina, 2016). As shown above, nostalgia is contingent on change, which also involves the loss of one time and the beginning of another. Instead of dealing with that loss and everything that comes with it, nostalgia “diverts attention to the past and away from the present” (Kalinina, 2016, p.8)

Not only does it reject the future, but nostalgia also looks too fondly at the past. Critics of nostalgia in Germany pointed out one of the main dangers of nostalgia as a whole: a romanticized, idealized notion of the past that is unrealistic (Cooke, 2004). Many historians consider nostalgia to be an unfavorable concept, claiming that nostalgia is deemed to be an “ethical and aesthetic” failure in that it does not recognize the reality of the past and instead colonizes it with a false one (Boym, 2007, p. 9). Furthermore, “it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one” (Boym, 2007, p. 10). Nostalgia is not considered to be as credible as history, which allegedly relies on “hard facts”. (Kalinina, 2016). In fact, the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia may go so far as to “question and even re-write history” (Kalinina, 2016, p. 10). Media itself is critiqued for disrupting memory and history, creating historical amnesia which is compounded when the media is nostalgic. Often considered a revisionist tactic, nostalgia has a tendency to re-write history in a way that is more palatable, entertaining, and appealing than it actually was. Nostalgic memories of the past are “sanitized” and “cleansed” versions of legitimate traumatic histories (Kalinina, 2016; Mollet, 2020). Consequently, popular media and nostalgia alike are criticized for commodifying and oversimplifying historical eras, ultimately providing inaccurate images of the past (Kalinina, 2016).

Another danger of both nostalgia and guilty pleasure entertainment is the inability to understand media critically. Nostalgia and lowbrow culture bring us pleasure, which the Frankfurt School is critical of. Adorno and Horkheimer (1944/1972) claim that “Pleasure always

means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness” (p. 13). This helplessness arises from the inability to think independently or critically. Guilty pleasures do not challenge the individual intellectually or add to their self-edification. Consequently, they are essentially mindless entertainment. Without engaging any critical thinking, guilty pleasures also function as escapism, akin to nostalgia. Therefore, a common critique of both guilty pleasures and nostalgia is that they are a “defeatist retreat from the present” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 919). Additionally, because guilty pleasures do not require complex critical thinking, they are usually associated with a lesser developed mind, therefore implying some form of return to a lesser developed state. Guilty pleasures associate themselves with nostalgia as both are returns to a former state, whether within the self or within one’s environment.

#### *Final Notes*

Despite its critiques, nostalgia provides immense relief, particularly within the form of film. This thesis cannot fully encompass what comfort watches are because comfort watches mean something different to each individual person. To some, a comfort watch may include a horror movie or a high-culture drama. The reasons for this may include nostalgia, as the viewer might want to return to a specific memory of watching that film regardless of the content, or it may be due to something else entirely. Animation and musicals also evoke a strong sense of comfort due to nostalgia and a variety of other causes. This thesis has found that comfort films consist of varying genres, cultural standings, and styles. However, there are clear consistencies within them, most notably gender and nostalgia. This thesis set out to understand the relationships between nostalgia, film, and comfort, yet in my research I found such strong links between the elements of comfort films and female oriented media that it begs an unexpected

question: is the notion of comfort itself feminine? Furthermore, this research compelled me to create my own list of comfort films (see Appendix A). Although many on my list are included in this analysis, they were selected because of their repeated inclusion in others' lists – a testament to their standings as comfort films.

For all of its problematic elements, the comfort film deserves its own place within media and cultural studies due to its widespread appeal and impact. The phrase itself has become a household term and most, if not all people, can immediately think of a film that brings them comfort. Furthermore, the comfort film has roots in other fields, such as psychology, which have also neglected to investigate the phenomenon. The next chapter of this thesis will examine nostalgia and film from a psychological perspective and an experimental study in the hopes of giving the comfort watch the credit it deserves.

### **Psychological Study**

#### Abstract

This thesis explored the relationship between nostalgia, film, and coping mechanisms, using both media theory and psychological lenses. Nostalgia, a concept with roots in both media theory and psychology, is best defined as homesickness for a time rather than a place. Nostalgia, when combined with film, leads to the concept of “comfort watches”, a scarcely researched topic. From a psychological standpoint, research suggests that nostalgia and media usage are commonly used coping mechanisms, yet there has been little to no research combining the two. The psychological study included in this thesis was conducted online in the United States using 83 participants aged 18-30 years to determine if there is a relationship between stress and the use of comfort films as a coping mechanism. The participants filled out a series of questionnaires measuring type/era of comfort film, stress, nostalgia proneness, media usage, and use of escapist coping strategies. The study found a significant positive relationship between an individual’s stress level and the age at which they first watched the comfort movie they selected. Additionally, a positive relationship between self-distraction as a coping mechanism and comfort film usage was found. An exploratory analysis also found a significant positive correlation between nostalgia and denial as a coping mechanism that was not predicted. Lastly, the analysis found that participants watched films for comfort significantly more during the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison to before the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Keywords: Nostalgia, media, comfort watch, coping, film, stress*

## Introduction

“We know the good guy will always win, that the monster will be defeated and that the cute couple will kiss after the big fight; we already know how these films end.” (Rocha, 2020).

Comfort movies, including childhood favorites, campy, cult favorites, and feel-good movies have long been a form of escapism for the stressed individual. Despite having watched our favorite films over and over, knowing how they end each time, we still want to watch them again. Perhaps it is the mere-exposure effect, which suggests that people tend to like something simply because it is familiar to them (Zajonc, 1968), that causes us to enjoy the same films after repeated viewings (Rocha, 2020). Maybe it is the repetition and power of knowing how things end that is comforting (Rocha, 2020). Or perhaps there is something specific about “comfort watches” that make them so appealing to us, particularly when dealing with substantial amounts of stress. The combined effects of nostalgia and media as coping mechanisms suggest that comfort watches can play a vital part in managing and addressing stressful situations through emotional regulation. While stress can take on many forms, this study will address large stressors (such as changes in financial situation or death of a close friend, as suggested by the Social Readjustment Rating Scale [Holmes & Rahe, 1967]) rather than smaller daily stressors. Thus far, the combination of stress, nostalgia, and film has not been studied. This research seeks to understand the relationships between these concepts and determine the importance of the comfort watch as a coping strategy.

## Definitions and Causes of Stress

Stress is defined by a variety of interpretations and is measured by many different criteria, both in academic circles and in daily life. One of the most widely applicable general interpretations of stress is Hans Selye’s (as cited in Everly et al., 2008) definition, which states that stress is “the sum total of wear and tear on the body”. He coined two different terms for the

different types of stress: eustress (positively motivating stress) and distress (stress leading to dysfunction) (Everly et al., 2008). There is also a difference between daily hassles, chronic stressors, and stressful life events. Daily hassles are lower in intensity but higher in frequency, whereas stressful life events are lower in frequency but higher in intensity. Chronic life stressors are high in frequency but may be higher or lower in intensity (Hahn & Smith, 1999).

Biologically, increased stress can be measured by an increase in Galvanic skin response (GSR), heart rate (measured by ECG), corticoid levels, and more (Tachè & Selye, 1985). This thesis will focus on distress, specifically chronic stressors and stressful life events as they are often higher in intensity, and how one may use “comfort movies” to cope with their negative effects that lead to dysfunction in daily life.

A key component of stress is event uncertainty. Although laboratory studies have found conflicting results in relation to event uncertainty, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) state that real life event uncertainty can cause psychological stress. This is because the more uncertainty there is, the harder it is to adjust to the situation, causing distress. Furthermore, event uncertainty can prevent anticipatory coping processes, increasing distress. Real life events are often much more meaningful and complicated than those created in a lab setting, which is a key limitation of past research that suggests that event uncertainty does not contribute to psychological stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Albrecht et al. (2007)’s concept of solastalgia detailed within the media theory chapters of this thesis is also evidence that change and event uncertainty can cause psychological stress. Event uncertainty can also be what causes nostalgia, as theorized by some media studies scholars (Böhn, 2007; Boym, 2007). As uncertainty causes stress, it could be implied that stability, such as revisiting a comforting time in one’s life through the use of comfort films, relieves it. However, the existing literature on change and stress does not

currently explore how the desire to return to a state prior to extreme change — one of the facets of nostalgia — affects coping.

### **Coping**

When experiencing stress, people find ways to mitigate the harm that comes from those distressing situations (they find ways to cope). Coping covers a large breadth of research, ranging from problem and emotion focused coping to Sigmund Freud's theories of defense mechanisms, with a variety of definitions. In animals, coping is considered any act that control unpleasant or difficult environmental conditions in order to reduce psychophysiological distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, in humans, coping is based more in cognition rather than behavioral action. In a human model of coping known as the psychoanalytic ego model, coping is defined as practical and flexible thoughts and acts that reduce stress by solving the problems the cause it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Furthermore, coping can also be defined as resilience. Although resilience and recovery from stressful or traumatic events are different, Everly et al. (2008) define resilience as "the ability to positively adapt to and/or rebound from significant adversity and the distress it often creates" (p. 262), which can also be seen as coping.

Lazarus & Folkman (1984) claim that there are two umbrella categories of coping strategies: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping means that the individual copes with their stress by addressing the problem at hand and thinking of ways to resolve it. Emotion-focused coping revolves around managing emotional distress. Others have furthered Lazarus & Folkman (1984)'s work by critiquing emotion-focused coping, claiming that the original term is often too vague and can imply the usage of maladaptive coping mechanisms such as avoidance. Emotional-approach coping is defined as processing and expressing one's emotions in a way that is still working towards the end goal of solving the

problem at hand (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007). This study will define coping as any thought or act that reduces stress, regardless of its ability to remove the stressor or solve the problem that is causing distress.

Using comfort films as a coping strategy would fall under the category of emotion-focused coping, but it still may not be considered a maladaptive coping mechanism. There is a notable distinction between types of disengagement as coping: positive distraction and avoidance (Waugh et al., 2020). Notably, individuals engage in avoidance when they do not have the proper mental or emotional resources to solve the problem, whereas one might engage in positive distraction as a way to rest and prepare to deal with the stressor. Positive distraction, including leisure, can be useful in coping with chronic life stressors, as it acts as a “planned breather” and allows the individual to disengage from the stressor without disengaging from the situation altogether (Waugh et al., 2020). Consistent with past research, Waugh et al. (2020)’s study found that positive distraction was positively correlated with positive emotions, and was not correlated with negative emotions, particularly when controlling for avoidance. Existing literature has not looked at the concept of comfort films specifically as positive distraction or as avoidance. While it would fall into the category of leisure, which is considered a positive distraction, it may also be considered escapism, which aligns itself more with avoidance. Therefore, it is important to determine which coping mechanisms it is correlated with (if any) and which category it is most likely to fall under, which will be analyzed in this study.

Much of the current research on coping mechanisms stems from Sigmund and Anna Freud’s concept of defense mechanisms. Based on Sigmund Freud’s concept of the id, ego, and superego, it is theorized that individuals use defense mechanisms to relieve the anxiety caused by the imbalance of the id and ego (Freud, 1936). The id, the most primitive part of the brain,

desires to give in to the most basic biological urges, while the ego controls morals. Thus, the superego must balance the two parts' desires. The anxiety that comes about due to any conflict within the id, ego, and superego results in the use of defense mechanisms (Freud, 1936).

However, the majority of this work was theoretical and was not examined through empirical research. Anna Freud (as cited in Hock, 2009) built on her father's research and concluded that there were five main defense mechanisms: projection, repression, sublimation, reaction formation, and regression. Regression, a return to a former state, has similar mechanisms to nostalgia, and therefore may play a role in why people watch comfort films.

### **Regression and Nostalgia**

Sigmund Freud's (as cited in Hock, 2009) concept of temporal regression, loosely put together through years of observing his patients, suggests that reverting back to a more undeveloped state is a maladaptive coping strategy (Jackson, 1969). The process of regressing is claimed to be a return to a more primitive and less organized stage of development from a more advanced stage of development. Anna Freud (as cited in Hock, 2009) furthered her father's research on defense mechanisms and claimed that regression is the ego's way of guarding itself from anxiety, stress, and discomfort by retreating to an earlier age and therefore an earlier stage of development. This stage of development is often less demanding and safer for the ego and the individual. This defense mechanism can be seen in both children and adults, and not just in neurotic or imbalanced individuals as was originally theorized. For example, a child may react to a stressful situation (such as a new sibling entering the home) by wetting the bed, even if they have not done so in years. Similarly, an adult may react to stressful situations (such as aging) by attempting to feel "young" again and acting impulsively (Hock, 2009). The reason that this process is seen as maladaptive by Sigmund Freud (as cited in Jackson, 1969) is because it

assumes one has undone all of their achievements to reach a more developed stage. Additionally, it may prevent the individual from developing other coping strategies that actually allow them to address and deal with the problem at hand (Hock, 2009). Comfort films are also seen as regressive by many media scholars (Kalinina, 2016; Pickering & Keightley, 2006), thus regression may play a role in comfort films.

Like regression, nostalgia relies on returning to a past state or time. As defined earlier, nostalgia means a wistful or sentimental yearning for the past (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Nostalgia as a coping mechanism has been studied before by various psychologists. There are varying conclusions on whether or not nostalgia is a healthy or adaptive coping strategy. Batcho (2013a)'s research found that nostalgia proneness was correlated with adaptive coping strategies (such as expressing emotions and social support) and did not correlate with maladaptive coping strategies (such as denial and escapism). However, Garrido (2018) found that nostalgia and depression are correlated when mediated by rumination. Garrido claims that nostalgia as a coping mechanism can be both adaptive and maladaptive, akin to the self-absorption paradox that suggests that self-reflection can be a healthy behavior but can also be correlated with depression and low self-esteem. This research suggests that those with particular personality types, namely those who are more likely to ruminate over the negative aspects of the past may inadvertently use nostalgia as a maladaptive coping mechanism rather than an adaptive one that causes self-reflection (Garrido, 2018). Hertz (1990) observed more nostalgic longing within Holocaust survivors as they aged. They came to the conclusion that nostalgia is an adaptive coping mechanism that aids the elderly cope with trauma and major life challenges (as cited in Batcho, 2013b). Furthermore, research by Sedikides et al. (2015) found that certain items on the Social Readjustment Rating scale (SRRS) were correlated with nostalgia proneness, but they did

not test to see if there was a correlation between stress and nostalgia proneness. The correlation between nostalgia proneness and individual SRRS items suggests that there may be a correlation between stress overall and nostalgia, further solidifying the notion that nostalgia could be used as a coping mechanism during times of distress. However, it still remains true that there has not been any literature testing the effect of comfort films which heavily rely on nostalgia and regression to evoke positive emotions, particularly within stressful contexts.

### **Media**

Media psychology overall has become a larger field of study as its impact becomes more pervasive in our everyday lives. According to The Nielson Company (2018), American adults spend approximately 11 hours per day interacting with some form of media. Although there are numerous studies focusing on the cons of increased media consumption, positive psychology has looked into the more beneficial effects of media on psychological well-being. Neubaum et al. (2020) found that repeated exposure to positive or elevating videos (videos showing acts of human kindness) elicit more prosocial behavior and motivation in comparison to negative or neutral stimuli. This not only suggests that positive media can induce positive emotions, but that it may leave a lasting effect, as Neubaum et al.'s study took place over the span of six weeks. As society's exposure and reliance on media on a daily basis grows, it is reasonable to assume that media can be a useful and frequently used coping mechanism. Research done by Nabi et al. (2017) states that media ranked fourth and fifth out of two lists of 25 different coping strategies given to two different samples, suggesting that is a relatively popular coping mechanism. Additionally, Waugh et al. (2020)'s research suggests that leisure (which can include media usage and film) as a positive distraction coping strategy is associated with positive emotions, which further indicates that media can be an adaptive coping strategy.

However, there is also a downside to an increase in media usage. Although there is conflicting research, Boers, et al. (2019) tested multiple theories and found that there is a link between increased television usage over one year and increased depression in adolescents. These findings, while significant, are not enough to negate the positive impact of media on coping. Boers et al. themselves state that their research focuses on the frequency of different types of media usage, not the content. Thus, it is important to consider the distinctions within categories of media as well as between. This, along with research conducted by Neubaum et al. (2020) suggests that the content and positive or negative valence of the media one consumes may have an effect on one's mood and overall psychological well-being. Therefore, the same effect could be caused by film, specifically comfort films may elicit positive emotions. Additionally, the vast majority of research has been correlational or descriptive, suggesting that perhaps media usage is linked with depression because those who are struggling use more media to cope (Boers et al., 2019; Wheeler, 2015). All of the existing research on media suggests that comfort films specifically could be used as coping mechanisms because how much influence media has, however this phenomenon has not been studied yet. The largest problem with existing research is the fact that the only media taken into account is Internet, videogame, music, television usage and overall screen time, and neglects a large, but specific, category of media: film (Boers et al., 2019; Nabi et al., 2017).

### **Study Overview**

Given the inattention to film overall and as a coping mechanism, there is a lack of research on comfort films; this thesis seeks to rectify this gap in the research. Existing research generally only looks at media as a whole or when zeroing in on a subtype of media, focuses on videogames as a key example of escapism (Boers et al., 2019; Nabi et al., 2017). However, film

has been shown to be a unique type of media, often because the individual can attach particular memories to it (Böhn, 2007). Nostalgic films specifically provide comfort for various reasons such as a return to youth and stability, as detailed in the media theory analysis of this thesis. Additionally, film has become more and more accessible due to the surge in streaming platforms, virtual movie theaters, higher quality machinery for viewing, and overall media usage, it is important to consider that film can be a valid part of one's coping strategy. The research in this thesis will focus on how nostalgia and media as coping mechanisms come together to form a specific type of coping mechanism: the comfort watch.

This study will be conducted through a series of questionnaires that assess the relationships between stress, nostalgia proneness, media usage, coping mechanisms and comfort film usage. The study will test the following hypotheses:

H1: The more severe the stress is, the further back in time the individual will go for comfort (e.g., a moderate stressor will result in watching a comfort film from 5 years ago, whereas an extreme stressor will result in watching a comfort film from 10+ years ago).

As mentioned above, Anna Freud suggested regression occurs in order to protect the ego by reverting back to a developmental stage that felt "less demanding" (as cited in Hock, 2009). Therefore, an individual who is undergoing more stress may go to further lengths to feel safe in comparison to their present situation, which may manifest itself in using media from even earlier in their childhood rather than a more recent exemplar.

H2: Nostalgia proneness will be positively correlated with the frequency of watching comfort films as a coping strategy.

As shown through the media theory analysis of comfort films, they are heavily contingent on nostalgia (Böhn, 2007). Therefore, it is predicted that nostalgia proneness and comfort film usage will be positively correlated.

H3: Frequency of comfort film usage will be positively correlated with escapist coping strategies and nostalgia proneness.

Although there is some conflicting research on the use of nostalgia as a coping mechanism, studies suggest that it is frequently used as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Furthermore, other coping strategies are considered maladaptive because they are escapist and do not face the problems at hand. Therefore, it is predicted that there will be a positive correlation between escapist coping strategies (denial and distraction) and frequency of comfort film usage. This is due to the media theory research that suggests comfort films are often products of nostalgia, which can be considered regressive (Böhn 2007; Freud, 1936).

H4: Overall media usage will be positively correlated with the frequency of watching comfort films as a coping strategy.

Overall media usage and the popularity of nostalgia has been increasing in popular culture (Mollet, 2020; The Nielson Company, 2018; Reisenwitz et al., 2004). As the two increase simultaneously, it may also influence individuals, causing their comfort film usage to increase as well. Furthermore, because comfort films a form of media, it would be reasonable to assume that there was a relationship between the two. Therefore, it is predicted that as an individual's media usage increases, the frequency of comfort film usage will also increase.

H5: Women are more likely to use comfort films as a coping strategy in comparison to other genders.

Research from media theorists such as Kalinina (2016) and Kuhn (1984) suggests that nostalgia as a whole is often gendered female due to the critical reception it receives. Because nostalgia and comfort films are often related, it is hypothesized that comfort films will be used more often by women in comparison to other genders because of their nostalgic nature (Böhn, 2007)

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A power analysis was done in order to determine how many participants were needed for an appropriately powered regression analysis with six predictor variables. In order to achieve a desired power of .80 with  $\alpha = .05$  and a medium effect size, the study must involve at least 97 participants (Green, 1991). Participants were recruited through college Facebook groups and word of mouth. Only participants between the ages of 18-30 were accepted, as the concept of “comfort movies” largely rely on nostalgia, which differs significantly between different generations. For example, a film released in 2005 is more likely to be a nostalgic comfort film for an 18-year-old who was a child at the time, rather than a 40-year-old who was in their 20s at that time. This specified age range allowed the researcher to not control for age during data analysis. A total of 83 participants, with ages ranging from 18-27 were recruited ( $M = 21.56$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ). Fifty-three (63.9%) participants were female, 7 (8.4%) were male, 3 (3.6%) were non-binary or a third gender, and 20 (24.1%) participants did not report their gender.

### **Materials**

#### ***Comfort Films***

The Comfort Film scale addresses two factors: frequency of comfort film usage and when the participant first watched the comfort film they selected. First, participants were asked how often they watch movies for comfort in times of distress. This was designed to assess the

frequency of comfort film usage. This was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 signifying *never* and 5 signifying *always*. Those who reported a 2 (rarely) or higher were asked to complete the rest of the scale and those who selected 1 (never) continued to the next scales without answering the rest of the questions in this section. Next, participants were asked how many comfort films they watched in an average year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and how many comfort films they watched in the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because this was asked in an open-ended format, the participants responses were re-coded to be consistent with the Likert-type scale using the following scoring: 5 (Always): 20+ films, 4 (Most of the time): 15-19, 3 (Half of the time) 10-14, 2 (Sometimes): 5-9, 1 (Never): 0-4. Those who selected 1 *never* on the Likert-type scale were automatically assigned a 0 in the open-ended format. The three frequency scores were averaged to create a singular “overall comfort film usage” variable. The higher their score was, the higher their comfort film usage. Lastly, in an open-ended format, participants were also asked to think of a film that they consider a “comfort movie”, the number of times they have watched the movie they selected, and their best estimate of when they first watched the film they selected in years (e.g., seven years ago). Because there is very little preexisting research on comfort films, these items were generated by the researcher to best assess comfort film usage. The items indicate high face validity as they directly ask about comfort film usage as well as the specifics of a particular comfort film. Due to the stressful nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to take into account that the results from the past year may not indicate the participants’ typical habits. Therefore, participants were asked about their comfort film usage habits prior to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Stress*

Stress was measured using the Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory, also known as the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). The SRRS consists of 43 items that describe stressful events ranging from death of a spouse to major change in social activities. Two items (retirement and son/daughter leaving home) were removed because they likely would not be applicable to the range of participants recruited for this study (18-30 years old). Each item was assigned a value by Holmes and Rahe (1967) ranging from 11 points to 100 points depending on the severity of the event. Participants were asked to denote how many times they have experienced each event within the past year and expect to experience within the upcoming year. Their responses were then multiplied by the scores attached to each item and added together to create a final stress score. The Holmes-Rahe prediction model (1967) states that scores under 150 suggest a low amount of life change and likelihood of a stress induced breakdown. Scores between 150-300 suggest a moderate amount of life change and a 50% change of a stress induced breakdown within the next 2 years. Scores over 300 suggest severe amounts of life changes and an 80% of a stress induced breakdown. The SRRS was found to have consistent scores between different populations (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Additionally, life change items and illness items within the scale were positively correlated (+0.118), suggesting internal reliability.

### *Nostalgia*

Nostalgia proneness was measured using the Southampton Nostalgia Scale (SNS) (Barrett et al., 2010). The scale consists of seven items, including six 7-point Likert-type scale items which are questions regarding nostalgia such as “How valuable is nostalgia for you?” and “How prone are you to feeling nostalgic?”. The first four items range from 1 *not at all* to 7 *very*

*much*. The next two Likert-type questions range from 1 *very rarely* to 7 *very frequently*. Lastly, participants were asked how often they brought to mind nostalgic experiences and were provided 7 options to choose from, ranging from *at least once a day* to *once or twice a year*. Higher scores on each item indicated higher nostalgia proneness. The items were averaged to find one overall nostalgia score (Barrett et al., 2010). The SNS was found to have high reliability  $\alpha = .86$ , (Routledge et al., 2011).

### ***Media Usage***

Participants were asked how often they consume each of the following forms of media: film/TV, music, video games, social media, Internet for leisure (not work). Consistent with research from Nabi et al. (2017) the participants were asked to estimate how many hours they spend on each per weekday and per weekend day, which were then averaged. They reported their answers in an open-ended format, rounded up to the closest hour. The average number of hours spent on each media form was combined and averaged into an overall media usage score (hours of overall media used per week). Higher scores represented higher overall media consumption.

### ***Coping Mechanisms***

The Brief COPE scale, developed by Carver (1997) and revised from the original COPE scale by Carver et al. (1989), was used to measure the frequency at which participants used certain styles of coping mechanisms, most notably *denial* and *self-distraction*. This scale consists of 14 subscales with two items each. The items included statements such as “I’ve been refusing to believe this has happened” and “I’ve been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things”. All 28 items are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 - *I haven’t been doing this at all*, 3 - *I’ve been doing this a lot*). Although participants filled out all 14 subscales, only *denial* and *self-distraction* were taken into account during analysis. The two items on each subscale

were averaged to create an overall score for that given subscale. Higher scores indicated more frequent usage of that given coping mechanism. All 14 subscales have Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .50 to .90, suggesting moderate to high internal reliability (Carver, 1997).

### **Procedure**

The study was conducted via Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Participants provided written informed consent prior to completing the survey. The participants completed a series of questionnaires (comfort film, stress, nostalgia proneness, media usage, and coping strategy adaptiveness), specifically ordered so that potentially distressing measures such as the SRRS were not last due to ethical concerns. The majority of the measures in the survey were in a fixed order, with the exception of two that were randomized in order to ensure there were no priming effects. First the SRRS (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) and the Brief COPE scale (Carver, 1997) were presented in that order, followed by the SNS (Barrett et al., 2010) and the media usage measure, which were randomized. The comfort film measure was presented last. Demographic information including age and gender was then collected. After the participants completed the five questionnaires, they were debriefed and thanked.

### **Ethics**

The more use of media grows, the more important it becomes to study it in various fields. So far, there has been no substantial research on the use of film as a coping strategy, despite the increase in accessibility to film (especially through streaming services). This study is based in both the fields of media psychology as well as positive psychology. Additionally, it may lead to further research so society can understand more about coping and if this is an adaptive or maladaptive coping strategy and why. This study did not cause more than minimal risk to the

participants. The study did require the participants to think about stressful events; however, it is likely that they would think about these stressful events on any given day. Some are ongoing, like the global pandemic, in which case the participant may already be thinking about it and the study would not introduce any new stressors. Some stressors mentioned may be more severe than others, such as death of a friend or jail term, however the distress that may have been caused by these items was mitigated as the participants were not asked to include specific details about these events. Additionally, this study did not address certain types of acute trauma such as assault. Lastly, the study asked about coping mechanisms and comforting films, which is a pleasant thought that may mitigate whatever stress that had been added by the other questions. The SRRS was placed at the start of the study to ensure that it would not be the last measure that participants saw before exiting the survey. Furthermore, the comfort film scale was put at the end of the survey so that participants would have engaged with a measure that is not distressing and could induce positive emotions before exiting the survey.

This study did not focus on any particular vulnerable population or any sensitive information such as sexuality, immigration status, etc. As mentioned above, it may have caused slight discomfort to think about stressful events, but it did not exceed minimal risk. At the end of the survey, but prior to debrief, participants were asked what their favorite movie was and what specific elements about it they enjoyed. This was done to encourage positive emotions and pleasant thoughts to mitigate the distress that may have occurred due to the study and return the participants to their baseline mood. Because priming likely did not have an effect on the results of this study, no deception was involved. The study was explained in full in the informed consent form as well as the debriefing. Participation in the study was truly voluntary as there was no compensation for participating, decreasing the chances for coercion. Lastly, all data was

collected through a password protected Qualtrics account that only the researcher and the study supervisors have access to. Overall, the benefits of the study will outweigh the potential risk to participants, as there is very slight potential for harm to be caused, but the research may help psychologists understand more about coping and film, which could further research in both the media and positive psychology fields.

## Results

### Tests of Hypotheses

To test the first hypothesis a Pearson correlation test was conducted to determine if there is a relationship between an individual's stress level and the age at which they first watched the comfort movie they selected. The data indicates that the higher the participants' stress scores, the "older" the comfort film,  $r(56) = .23, p = .043$ , one-tailed. This does not refer to the films' original release dates, but the age at which the participants first watched the movie they selected. These results are consistent with the predicted hypothesis.

To test the rest of the hypotheses, a multiple (linear) regression analysis was conducted to explore whether nostalgia proneness, overall media usage, and adaptive coping strategies affect the frequency of comfort film usage. The analysis determined the effect of each variable individually as well as the overall multiple variable model accounting for the frequency of comfort film usage. It was predicted that as nostalgia proneness, overall media usage, and escapist coping mechanisms increase together, the frequency of comfort film usage would also increase. However, a significant relationship between all variables was not found,  $F(5, 57) = 2.16, p = .070, R^2 = .16$ . After controlling for overall media usage and escapist coping strategies, it was predicted that nostalgia proneness would have positive relationship with the frequency of comfort film usage. However, data did not indicate a significant relationship between nostalgia

and overall comfort film usage,  $r(61) = .146, p = .127$ . Next, after controlling for nostalgia proneness and overall media usage, escapist coping strategies such as denial and self-distraction were predicted to have a positive relationship with the frequency of comfort film usage. Data indicated that self-distraction as a coping strategy was positively correlated with overall comfort film usage,  $r(61) = .353, p = .002$ . However, there was no significant correlation found between denial and comfort film usage,  $r(61) = -.061, p = .318$ . In the same multiple regression analysis, when combined into a single variable, escapist coping strategies, no significant relationship was found with comfort film usage,  $r(61) = .190, p = .68$ . Lastly, after controlling for nostalgia proneness and other coping strategies, overall media usage was predicted to correlate with frequency of comfort film usage. However, data indicates that there was not a significant correlation between overall media usage and comfort film usage,  $r(61) = -.077, p = .274$ .

Lastly, it was predicted that women would show higher rates of overall comfort film usage in comparison to other genders based on research based in media studies that suggests that nostalgia and comfort films tend to be more feminine or have female audiences (Böhn, 2007; Kalinina, 2016; Kuhn, 1984). A 2 independent samples t-test (two-tailed) revealed that there was not a statistically significant difference between women's frequency of comfort film usage ( $M = 2.43, SD = 1.01$ ) in comparison to other genders ( $M = 2.70, SD = 1.27$ ),  $t[61] = .736, p = .465, r^2 = .01, 95\% \text{ CI for the difference } [-.46, .99]$ .

### **Exploratory Analysis**

Although not initially predicted, additional statistically significant results were found. A Pearson correlation showed a statistically significant positive relationship between denial as a coping mechanism and nostalgia proneness,  $r(62) = .280, p = .013$ . Furthermore, a positive correlation was found between stress and nostalgia proneness,  $r(62) = .260, p = .019$ . Although

nostalgia proneness was not significantly correlated with overall comfort film usage, it was correlated with one of the items within the overall comfort film score *how often do you watch films for comfort in times of distress?* The data indicate a significant positive correlation between the two,  $r(61) = .273, p = .015$ .

Next, a paired samples t-test was conducted to compare the number of comfort films watched in average year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the number of comfort films watched in the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to determine if the COVID-19 pandemic affected the frequency of comfort film usage. The COVID-19 pandemic could be considered a stressor and therefore may have had an influence on the participants' frequency of watching comfort films. Furthermore, the full extent of stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic may not have been encapsulated by the SRRS, which is why additional analysis was done. Data indicates that participants watched significantly more movies during the COVID-19 pandemic ( $M = 2.52, SD = 1.47$ ) in comparison to prior to the COVID-19 pandemic ( $M = 1.79, SD = 1.25$ ) and the number of films,  $t[57] = 6.17, p < .001, d = .894, 95\% \text{ CI for the difference } [.51, 1.10]$ .

Despite this finding, further analyses revealed conflicting results. The data did not show a significant correlation between overall comfort film usage and stress,  $r(61) = .046, p = .361$ . However, analyzing the relationship between stress and comfort film usage prior to the COVID-19 pandemic versus during the COVID-19 pandemic yields interesting results. The correlation between comfort films watched prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and stress was not found to be significant,  $r(56) = .029, p = .414$ . The correlation between comfort films watched during the COVID-19 pandemic and stress was also not found to be significant,  $r(57) = .054, p = .342$ . The correlations were not significant, but there was a difference between the two correlations that

followed the same direction as the above t-test. The t-test indicated that participants watched more comfort films during the COVID-19 pandemic than before, which is corroborated by the analysis that indicate a stronger correlation between stress and comfort film usage during the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison to the correlation between stress and comfort film usage prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this Pearson's correlation being insignificant may be explained due to the statistical analysis being underpowered, which will be further explored.

### **Discussion**

Out of the five proposed hypotheses, two were shown to be statistically significant. The researcher predicted there would be a correlation between stress and the age at which participants watched the comfort film they selected for the first time. As stress scores rose, the movies the participants selected got "older" (in this case meaning that they were from earlier on in the participants' lives). Additionally, self-distraction and comfort film usage was shown to be significantly correlated, as was predicted. Although only two hypotheses were shown to be statistically significant, these results do not wholly discredit the proposed hypotheses. It is possible that the study was underpowered, causing some results to be statistically insignificant even though they. For example, there was no correlation between comfort film usage prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and stress or comfort film usage during the COVID-19 pandemic and stress despite the correlation going in the correct direction. This is because the analyses revealed very low observed powers of .08 and .16 respectively instead of at least .80. However, there was a statistically significant difference between the number of films watched prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that the COVID-19 pandemic could be considered a stressor. Furthermore, the Pearson's  $r$  values follow this trend as the positive

correlation between comfort film usage during the COVID-19 pandemic and stress was stronger than the correlation between comfort film usage prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and stress, even if the individual results were not significant.

Furthermore, data analyses revealed an unusually low observed power of .11 instead of at least .80 when analyzing the difference in comfort film usage between genders. Because the study was underpowered, results that may have been significant would not appear. For example, the correlation between nostalgia and comfort film usage was positive, as predicted, but it was not significant. This could be because it only reached an observed power of .56 instead of at least .80. This was also true for the relationship between stress and overall comfort film usage. Even though the correlation was positive, as predicted, it was insignificant and only reached an observed power of .12 instead of at least .80. However, there were some results that went in the opposite direction than predicted. There was a negative, but not significant, correlation between media use and comfort film usage when a positive correlation was predicted. This analysis also only reached an observed power of .56 rather than at least .80 but the unexpected results of this analysis are not likely to be due to the analysis being underpowered and may be due to a factor that is outside the scope of this thesis.

One of the limitations of the study is that some individuals, particularly men, may not find comfort in film at all, which is not studied in this thesis. This is part of a larger limitation of the study, namely the lack of gender diversity within participants. The majority of participants were female (at least 63.9% female participants) which made it difficult to analyze any significant results between different genders. The overrepresentation of female participants was due to a variety of factors including the researcher's gender identity, the location of recruitment, and the nature of comfort films and nostalgia. The non-female participants in the study may have

more feminine habits in how they engage with comfort films. Because comfort films are arguably gendered female (Bode, 2010; N. Wilson, 2014; Grady et al., 2018), the male participants in particular who chose to participate in the study may align more with the habits of the female participants which may also skew the data.

The expansive definition of comfort films is also a limitation to the study. The vague understanding of comfort films allows the participants' responses to vary significantly in their intention, which could result in data being misinterpreted. Additionally, this study does not take into account a large category of stressors, such as the distress caused by classism, racism, sexism, etc. This could lead to potentially inaccurate stress scores that would also skew the data and affect the results of the study.

This research will hopefully spur further investigation into other comfort media and coping. For example, it may be useful to understand if there are differences in results between film, television, music, and video games while coping and if some forms of media are more useful or adaptive than others. Because there is not a significant amount of research regarding the differences between types of media, it may be possible that the results vary for each different type of media. Additionally, as the comfort film is a broad category of media, and is not always limited to nostalgic films, it may be useful to understand what else about film can be so comforting in times of distress. Many comfort films are also considered guilty pleasures, implying that the role of guilt in comfort and coping should also be studied. The results of this study indicate that the comfort watch as a whole should not be undermined and its value as a coping mechanism should be recognized.

### **Conclusion**

There has always been and always will be a desire to return to a more familiar and comfortable time, particularly when enduring distress. As media usage and dependence has increased, the comfort film has become a commonly used coping mechanism. Because political and social spheres continue to become more tumultuous, it is of the utmost importance to understand how to deal with these stressors, and the use of media and film has been revealed to be a common coping strategy. Comfort films have clear roots in both media theory and psychology, making it imperative to utilize both lenses when studying them. From a psychological standpoint, there is paucity of data on this topic and the study included in this thesis specifically investigates the relationship between comfort film usage, stress, overall media usage, and other escapist coping strategies.

Through research in media theory and psychological literature, it is shown that comfort films consist of a combination of factors, including but not limited to nostalgia, gender, the role of media overall. In addition to the positive aspects of nostalgia and comfort films, both media and psychology research indicates that there are adverse effects, such as the escape from problems at hand in the inability to manage. Consequently, it is important to view comfort watches from a critical lens to truly understand their effects on the individual and on the fields they encompass. Until more research has been conducted, it will not be possible to come to a conclusive understanding of the comfort film. Therefore, this thesis strives to close a gap in the literature in media theory and psychology that has neglected to investigate this phenomenon that deserves its own place in both fields.

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**Appendix A**  
Personal Comfort Watches

*About Time* (2013) dir. Richard Curtis  
*Atonement* (2007) dir. Joe Wright  
*Date Night* (2010) dir. Shawn Levy  
*Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) dir. Karan Johar  
*Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) dir. Hayao Miyazaki  
*The Longest Ride* (2015) dir. George Tillman Jr.  
*Lost River* (2014) dir. Ryan Gosling  
*My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) dir. Hayao Miyazaki  
*Om Shanti Om* (2007) dir. Farah Khan  
*Paddington* (2014) dir. Paul King  
*Paddington 2* (2017) dir. Paul King  
*Safe Haven* (2013) dir. Lasse Hallström  
*The Switch* (2010) dir. Josh Gordon, Will Speck  
*Taylor Swift: Reputation Stadium Tour* (2018) dir. Paul Dugdale  
*Twilight* (2008) dir. Catherine Hardwicke  
*The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1* (2011) dir. Bill Condon  
*The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2* (2012) dir. Bill Condon  
*The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* (2010) dir. David Slade  
*The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (2009) dir. Chris Weitz

**Appendix B**  
Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) (Holmes & Rahe, 1967)

Instructions: Directions: If an event mentioned has occurred in the past year, or is expected in the near future, copy the number in the score column. If the event has occurred or is expected to occur more than once, multiple this number by the frequency of the event.

	<b>Impact score</b>	<b>My score</b>
Death of spouse	100	
Divorce	76	
Marital Separation	65	
Jail Term	63	
Death of close family member	63	
Personal injury or illness	53	
Marriage	50	
Fired at work	47	
Marital reconciliation	45	
Change in health of family member	44	
Pregnancy	40	
Sex difficulties	39	
Business readjustment	39	
Gain of a new family member	39	
Change in financial state	38	
Death of a close friend	37	
Change to a different line of work	36	
Change in number of arguments w/ spouse	35	
Mortgage over \$20,000	31	
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30	
Change in responsibilities at work	29	

	<b>Impact score</b>	<b>My score</b>
Trouble with in laws	29	
Outstanding personal achievement	28	
Spouse begins or stop work	26	
Begin or end school	26	
Change in living conditions	25	
Revisions of personal habits	24	
Trouble with boss	23	
Change in work hours or conditions	20	
Change in residence	20	
Change in schools	20	
Change in recreations	19	
Change in church activities	19	
Change in social activities	19	
Mortgage or loan less than \$20,000	17	
Change in sleeping habits	16	
Change in number of family get-togethers	15	
Change in eating habits	15	
Vacation	13	
Christmas approaching	12	
Minor violation of the law	11	
<b><u>TOTAL SCORE:</u></b>		



**Appendix D**  
Brief COPE Scale (Carver, 1997)

- I. Active Coping
  - a. I've been concentrating my efforts on doing something about the situation I'm in.
  - b. I've been taking action to try to make the situation better.
- II. Planning
  - a. I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do.
  - b. I've been thinking hard about what steps to take.
- III. Positive Refraining
  - a. I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.
  - b. I've been looking for something good in what is happening.
- IV. Acceptance
  - a. I've been accepting the reality of the fact that it has happened.
  - b. I've been learning to live with it.
- V. Humor
  - a. I've been making jokes about it.
  - b. I've been making fun of the situation.
- VI. Religion
  - a. I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.
  - b. I've been praying or meditating.
- VII. Using Emotional Support
  - a. I've been getting emotional support from others.
  - b. I've been getting comfort and understanding from someone.
- VIII. Using Instrumental Support
  - a. I've been trying to get advice or help from other people about what to do.
  - b. I've been getting help and advice from other people.
- IX. Self-Distraction
  - a. I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things.
  - b. I've been doing something to think about it less, such as going to movies, watching TV, reading, daydreaming, sleeping, or shopping.
- X. Denial
  - a. I've been saying to myself "this isn't real."
  - b. I've been refusing to believe that it has happened.
- XI. Venting
  - a. I've been saying things to let my unpleasant feelings escape.
  - b. I've been expressing my negative feelings.
- XII. Substance Use
  - a. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better.
  - b. I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it.
- XIII. Behavioral Disengagement
  - a. I've been giving up trying to deal with it.
  - b. I've been giving up the attempt to cope.
- XIV. Self-Blame
  - a. I've been criticizing myself.
  - b. I've been blaming myself for things that happened.