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**#MENTALHEALTHMATTERS: MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS IN  
MEDIA AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS ON STIGMA REDUCTION IN  
THIRD CULTURE KIDS**

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DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**



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### **Abstract**

The recent amplified attention towards mental health and overall wellbeing has been accelerated by awareness campaigns in media, which are culturally and regionally tailored to encourage efficacy and positive attitude changes. Some of these mental health awareness campaigns are disseminated on the social media platform Instagram, which is contradictory to Instagram's corporate lack of acknowledgement towards its addictiveness and negative impacts on user mental health. The aesthetic and influencer culture surrounding social media empowers its systemic problems, which is exacerbated by modern society's media dependency. Within its discriminatory and oppressive algorithm, mental health awareness campaigns created by Instagram represent corporate advocacy and its potential performativity in endorsing public health issues for brand image. For social media platforms to be nondiscriminatory whilst maintaining its communicative benefits, the corporations must denote profit-minded ideologies and systems – decentralizing its monopolized control with wider accessibility. Within this social media ecosystem, third culture kids – or those who identify with more than one cultural background due to frequent relocation in their developmental years – are vulnerable to psychological disruption yet often excluded from the target audiences of these awareness campaigns. The migratory nature of third culture kids fosters dependency on social media to stay connected, thus encouraging addiction to its algorithm and further vulnerability to capitalistically encoded messages. The psychological study in this paper examines the effectiveness of social media corporations' mental health awareness campaigns in reducing mental health stigma in third culture kids. Domestic and third culture kid students studying in colleges and universities in the United States will complete self-report surveys immediately after and two weeks after viewing mental health awareness content to assess changes in stigma levels. The results are

anticipated to affirm that these mental health awareness campaigns are more effective for majority groups (i.e., domestic students or White people) than for minority groups (i.e., third culture kids and People of Color) – affirming social media theories about discriminatory social media algorithms and highlighting the need to further cater towards populations with heightened risks towards psychological distress. Overall, this paper will aim to contribute to the lack of research on the growing third culture kid population and illuminate the implications of a globally nomadic lifestyle.

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## **#MentalHealthMatters: Mental Health Awareness Campaigns in Media and its Effectiveness on Stigma Reduction in Third Culture Kids**

There has been a shift in conversations surrounding mental health, especially due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that caused major psychological distress and accelerated the need for attention to mental wellness. The pandemic not only represents an economic and medical crisis, but also a psychological crisis that is associated with a decline in subjective wellbeing (Zacher & Rudolph, 2021). To respond to this shift in mental health awareness, some corporations have given their employees paid time off to deal with feelings of burnout. Trendy companies such as LinkedIn, Bumble, and Hootsuite gave their employees a paid week off to tackle burnout and take care of their wellbeing (Schwab, 2021). This structural-level spotlight on wellbeing has initiated conversations about how corporations can better prioritize their employees' mental health, as well as encouraged attention to mental health needs on a societal level. The topic of mental health was also illuminated in the highly controversial 2021 Olympics. During the competition, star athletes Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles publicly attended to their mental health, bringing further attention to the topic of mental health awareness (Kaufman, 2021). Their public commitment to mental health underscored the importance of both physical and psychological wellbeing for athletic performance. The media-wide coverage on their decisions sparked conversations about mental health in convergence with the topics of self-care and professionalism. This culmination of societal attention towards mental health contributes to the need for further exploration for mental health awareness and stigma.

This paper will examine the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns in media on stigma reduction in third culture kids. The term *third culture kids* refers to someone who spent their formative years in countries that are different to their citizenship due to parental

situations, and thus identifies with more than one cultural background (Pollock et al., 2017). This understudied population is only growing due to increased globalization and cross-cultural interactions. This project will investigate the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns on stigma reduction in this population through two lenses: a theoretical media studies perspective and a psychological research approach. In the media studies portion, mental health awareness campaigns will be analyzed through the lens of social media as a platform that fosters addiction through its oppressive algorithm and structure. The dichotomy of promoting a public health initiative on a predatory media platform will be theoretically examined and critiqued. The psychology portion will investigate if mental health awareness campaigns in media are more effective for certain audiences, with a focus on the growing yet understudied population of third culture kids. The combination of these two disciplines will explore the problematic aspects of social media, the manifestations of mental health issues in media, and the disproportionate effects that mental health awareness campaigns in media may have on different populations.

### **Media Consumption and Mental Health**

The media consumption habits of the world have inarguably shifted due to the growing prevalence of social media. It has become a media phenomenon that easily builds connections and fosters conversation, thus enhancing users' reliance on these tools. However, despite being an innovative platform, the toxic structural elements of social media can be detrimental to the mental health of its users. These corporation-owned platforms are centered around profit, and the prospects of money often outweigh the negative effects of algorithmic addiction. This exploitation of users for profit was unveiled in a series of exposés against the social media titan Meta – still widely known as Facebook – by the *Wall Street Journal* and former Facebook engineer Frances Haugen. These reports revealed that Facebook heavily contributes to the spread

of misinformation by allowing notorious and influential individuals to bypass the social media site's content evaluation process (Horowitz, 2021). Facebook capitalizes from users' attention by implementing an algorithm that pushes increasingly divisive and polarizing content, thus encouraging more comments, shares, and other indicators of engagement (Hagey & Horowitz, 2021). Meta's confidential studies showed that the effects of these exploitative systems were especially prominent in younger generations. The Meta-owned visual social media platform Instagram is failing to protect young children, one of its key demographics, for the sake of profit. The internal studies suggest that Instagram is harmful for the mental health of teenage girls, since heavily edited content on the platform promotes unrealistic body standards and thus nurtures depression, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts in this vulnerable population (Wells et al., 2021). The corporation knew about the mental health issues that their platform could trigger yet continued to use these predatory mechanisms. The Instagram algorithm promotes negative social comparison, especially on the addictive Explore Page – which produces an endless supply of personally-targeted content to retain usage of the social media platform. This, along with the emergence of the video social media site TikTok's highly targeted For You Page, has illuminated the technologically addictive nature of accurately individualized content. This function of Instagram, which posits a never-ending feed of similar content, contributes to the polarization of user attitudes – resulting in one in three teenage girls reporting worsened body image after spending time on Instagram in 2019 (Wells et al., 2021). Meta continues to attract malleable children and young adults to its predatory platform out of fear of losing a critical generation of users that could generate future profit – and has even announced the development of a platform explicitly for preteens (Wells & Horowitz, 2021). These recent insights into Meta's true



intentions further highlight the urgency for a platform that is positive for users' mental health and wellbeing.

In a push to combat mental health issues stemming from social media, or in a calculated performance to appear to do so, many social media corporations have created campaigns that promote mental health awareness. The primary aim of these campaigns appears to be to reduce stigma towards mental health issues. However, this goal is contradictory to the true priorities of these social media corporations, who toxically embed its users in a cycle of addiction and profit. Although these campaigns oppose the organizations' prioritization of profit, they boost the image of the brands in its oblivious users – attracting more attention towards these social media tools. The negative effects of these predatory algorithms can differ between communities and populations, as children or those less educated about the internet are more susceptible and vulnerable to these exploitative methods. Meta is already leveraging this lack of education by striking simple feature phone deals with network companies in developing countries, which includes the pre-installing of Facebook in these phones (Goel, 2013). This allows for a seamless introduction of Facebook, fostering immense loyalty to the social media platform and leading these unsuspecting users to even believe that Facebook equates to the internet (Goel, 2013). The exploitation of vulnerable populations' lack of media literacy can further ingrain these communities within the social media ecosystem, fostering dependency.

The dissonance that occurs from the dichotomy presented by the social media platforms' promotion of mental health awareness campaigns can negatively impact the same public health issue and emphasize the existing structures and methods of addictive social media systems. There is sufficient evidence that social media presents a public health crisis, despite its prevalence in modern society. Its systematic captivation and retention of users' attention harbors

addiction and maladaptive thoughts. Through mental health awareness campaigns, these social media corporations champion the mental wellbeing of its users whilst contributing to the exacerbation of mental health issues. By creating, uploading, and promoting branded mental health awareness campaigns within their algorithms, the social media platform of Instagram urges awareness towards mental health issues whilst being detrimental to users' mental health. This contradiction is intertwined within the digital conversations and culture surrounding mental health, the fundamental systemic problems of social media algorithms, and the performativity of digital advocacy and endorsement. There is a contradictory dichotomy between the addictive nature of social media and advocating for the public health cause of mental health awareness on the same predatory platform. By critiquing these interconnected systems, this paper will highlight a space where awareness campaigns on social media can create lasting and positive change in attitudes towards mental health.

### **Awareness Campaigns on Instagram**

To accurately depict the effects of social media on mental health, and the dichotomy it presents when promoting wellness, I will specifically focus on the social media platform Instagram, which is owned by the social networking conglomerate Meta, or formerly Facebook. Instagram is a visually oriented social media platform that allows users above the age of 13 to share audio-visual content to their own pages. This platform consists of the photo and video sharing mechanisms of posts, time-sensitive stories, video reels, longer videos called IGTV, as well as direct messaging and shopping tools. The Instagram algorithm personalizes the posts that are displayed to each user on the Home Feed and the Explore Page. Users who register with an account can upload content to their personal page, and interact with other users through liking, commenting, saving, and sharing other content, as well as messaging others through the direct

messaging function. Instagram has its own corporate page, where they upload original content and information. In recent years, Instagram has released two major mental health awareness campaigns through this corporate page on their own platform. Marne Levine, who was Instagram's Chief Operating Officer in 2017, stated that these campaigns were inspired by users' "ability to communicate how they're feeling, making even the most invisible struggles more visible to friends and family" and "represents Instagram's commitment to foster the safest, kindest online community for self-expression" (McNamara, 2017). The first campaign, titled *#HereForYou* in 2017, was an influencer partnership campaign between Instagram and three of its popular mental health content creators Elyse Fox, Sacha Cuddy, and Luke Ambler (McNamara, 2017). It consisted of posts on the corporate Instagram page, sponsored posts on each of the creators' pages, and a partnership with Troian Bellisario, an actress popular among younger Millennials and older Gen Z, to disseminate the campaign through offline media outlets such as Good Morning America. For its second campaign, *#RealConvo* in 2019, Instagram decided to partner with the advocacy nonprofit American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, or AFSP (McNamara, 2019). The main feature of this campaign was also the partnerships with multiple influential content creators on Instagram. The campaign recruited 10 influencers from a diverse range of fields including actors, dancers, mental health and wellbeing activists, zine creators, and social media support page creators, to advocate for mental health awareness through sponsored posts. Whilst these influencers all hold power over their fanbase, their brands are vastly different – actors and media personalities such as Sasha Pieterse and Jari Jones have a more polished brand, whereas internet activists such as Vivian Nunez and Elyse Fox emphasize a more authentic and personable brand. This campaign garnered mass engagement, with the hashtag *#RealConvo* being used over 35K times, the influencer videos on the AFSP Instagram

page leading to over 27K views, and the AFSP Instagram page gaining 7K new followers (Shorty Awards, 2019). This campaign was also successful outside of Instagram, and the *#RealConvo* Twitter Chat gained over 50.5M impressions (Shorty Awards, 2019). *#RealConvo* was critically celebrated and nominated in the mental health campaign category for a Shorty Social Good Award – a respected award in the advertising and public relations industry (Shorty Awards, 2019). I will focus on these two campaigns as media objects that exemplify the dichotomy of advocating for public health awareness on a platform that is detrimental to the same cause.

### **Social Media Dependency and Branding Culture**

#### **Through the Lens of the Media Dependency Theory**

The interdependent relationships between media objects, its audience, and society heavily influence the workings of mass media communication. Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur's (1976) Media Dependency Theory remains relevant as a theoretical framework that explains the reciprocal relationships between media information resources, its audiences, and the society these systems exist within. Individuals must lean on media resources to collect and process information that is essential in navigating modern society. As societal structures continue to grow more complex, an abundance of information emerges – regardless of legitimacy – leading individuals to grow less aware of information that pertains to their own position in society. To compile and evaluate the most accurate and relevant information, individuals are forced to rely on the mass media systems that engage with attitude shift processes on the individual, group, and societal levels of action. Buried by the endless and overwhelming supply of information, the fundamental need to understand one's world to act effectively and meaningfully within their space becomes ingrained into the cyclical systems of mass media. This dependency on mass media for critical information,

especially during periods of rapid or pervasive social and societal change, coerces adjacent capitalistic systems that engage in explicit solicitations to capture, entertain, and persuade audiences for profit. For media systems, retaining audience and user attention becomes synonymous to profit. The plethora of information within capitalistic society creates an addiction to these media curation systems, carving out a space for the inevitable cycle of continuous profit.

As media flourishes as an essential tool to curate information, the creators and controllers of media content emerge as looming yet influential stakeholders in the affective, behavioral, and cognitive changes of its audience. The audience's heightened dependency on media systems that curate the most relevant information allows these stakeholders to alter audience beliefs, which in turn impacts societal outlooks and structures on a larger scale (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Out of these influential stakeholders, creators of the algorithm hold tremendous power. With the media algorithms serving as the dominant method of information collection, the creators of the algorithms hold the capacity to serve audiences with biased information that can alter beliefs and cognitions, impacting society on a structural level. Since individuals need to rely on media structures to effectively sift through the flow of information to formulate attitudes and cognitions towards objects, these media systems have the power to disseminate, influence, and polarize on a global level. When this power is mediated by the corporations' inclination towards profit, the impact of these media systems on society can cultivate biases and corruption. The corporations possess the ability to selectively disseminate information and knowledge on a global scale, thus holding the ultimate power of widespread belief alteration. They can purposefully trigger emotions that lead to concrete, destructive movements on a large scale; they are able to intentionally activate and move masses through the societal reliance on media as the primary source of information. To filter through the pool of information in the media, we must rely on

programs that sift through this information basin and curate the most relevant knowledge for each individual. Because of this inevitable over-dependency on information curation, these corporations hold the power to unethically transcend the individual level of influence and cause change on a societal level.

The grasp that technological corporations have on the acquisition of information can further manipulate audience perceptions, which is apparent through Hall's (1973) model of Encoding and Decoding. In television, which in this case can encompass audio and visual image transmission on social media, messages are delivered through the process of encoding by the creator of the message and decoding by the perceiver of the message. The key messages behind a media object must be transcribed in and out of the message-form and the meaning-dimension (Hall, 1973). However, the encoding and decoding may not be symmetrical for both creator and perceiver. Since the corporations cannot control how the audience will decode a message, the interpretations of a message that result from the communication depend on the audience and their backgrounds, biases, and experiences. The encoding and decoding process thus presents a balance of control and autonomy, where the corporations' preferred interpretation is suggested yet individuals have control over their own perceptions. Because audiences are given indicators towards messages that are important, they will gravitate towards selectively decoding messages that corporations and powerful individuals want to communicate. The clear creation of media tropes is a clear example of this communication method, as it serves as indexes of important messages (Hall, 1973). Within the realm of social media and corporate awareness campaigns, audiences are given pointers by the social media companies that highlight the dominant interpretations of messages that corporations want audiences to decode.

Although both the Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) and the Encoding and Decoding Model (Hall, 1973) were solidified over 40 years ago, its applicability and relevance prevail, as the level of reliance on media systems has only increased. The accessibility of mass media tools has surged and the algorithms that dictate these platforms have grown more intricate, cyclically feeding into media dependency by providing precisely individualized and tailored content. A select number of conglomerates have monopolized the media industry, offering an array of services that cater to every need. This centralized control has shifted from a passive, one-way message from media corporations to an interactive, bilateral conversation between corporate entities and individuals. Because of this two-way messaging process, media dependency has now shifted towards interaction, where audiences and users feel empowered to actively engage and produce individual responses to the media information. This individualized nature of social media also presents an illusion of control for users, and this enhanced sense of autonomy fosters more dependency and reliability on these media platforms. Within these monopolized curation systems, individuals now hold the power to tailor their media intake preferences, down to the aesthetic feel of the platform itself. This superficial control presents a sense of agency and ownership over the content that is presented – which encourages more dependency – but is ultimately a mirage that the media corporations uphold. The corporations still hold the ownership to bias, censor, and oversee all content and its presentation, making this fantasy of control a delusion. Despite holding more influence and power than ever due to the interactive aspect of social media, the immense profit that societal-level media dependency has brought to these media corporations has blurred the purpose of curatory algorithms. There are risks of hostile digital interactions, misinformation, and polarization between individuals at the cost of the wellbeing of all media information service users. By

further exploiting the inevitable cycle of addiction and dependency on media systems for the profit of a select number of corporations, these media conglomerates are contradicting the positive potential of media systems to connect and inform – and are instead inflicting harm to its users.

### **Social Media Culture and Influence**

On social media, visual aesthetics heavily factor into the conveyance of messages. This includes the color or design of a post, the dominant style of a profile, and even the style in which a text is written. The visual is especially prominent on Instagram, as the modes of its content are images and videos. These methods of personal expression create a culture surrounding visualization on social media. These aesthetic inclinations differ based on specific subcultures or topics on social media, and conforming to the aesthetic style of a subculture can underscore an individual's identification with that culture. For example, the popularity of the subculture aesthetic Cottagecore has resurged especially due to the social media platform TikTok. Cottagecore is an aesthetic that embodies the fantasy of escaping to a cottage in the woods to live simplistically (Brand, 2021). This anti-capitalistic yearning is visualized in the form of visuals that depict nature, the hand-made, idyllic isolation, and overall earth-tone colors (Brand, 2021). A user thus expresses their identification with the Cottagecore community by conforming to this aesthetic style on social media and self-cataloguing their content style as Cottagecore. These subcultural social media styles are driven primarily by influencers who identify with a certain aesthetic. In the example of Cottagecore, users with a large following, such as the user @fairies\_and\_frogs, post content that conforms to this aesthetic style — thus solidifying the Cottagecore aesthetic and furthering the digital Cottagecore culture by disseminating and popularizing this style (Brand, 2021). This user conforms to the Cottagecore aesthetic by



uploading idyllic photos of picnics in sunny fields, dainty flowers and small creatures, and self-reliant cooking and crafting that embody the fantasy of simplistic solitude. Therefore, each subculture or topic on social media affiliates itself with a particular aesthetic of online presence. Although not as visually and thematically defined as online-born aesthetics like Cottagecore, there is a distinct culture and visual aesthetic that come with the topic of mental health.

There is a culture surrounding visualizations of mental health on social media through digital artifacts and posts. In the sphere of mental health culture on social media, the most prominent images that exemplify this culture are visualized text and personal images. Since there is a common assumption that social media is a visual representation of an individual, there is an emphasis on maximizing visual presence that easily communicates an entity’s overall purpose and “vibe” (Seelig et al., 2019). The aesthetic style is what clearly communicates the “vibe” and central themes of an account, which most clearly manifests in the form and design of the content (Seelig et al., 2019). These media artifacts pertain to a specific aesthetic of visualizing mental health, contributing to and driving the overall digital mental health culture.

**Figure 1**

*A Post on Emma Hepburn’s Instagram Account for #RealConvo*



*Note.* This post is an infographic that textually explains mental health conversations, created for the #RealConvo campaign (Hepburn, 2020).

This style of visualization is typical for the online mental health community. Hepburn's (2020) infographic, which was made for the #RealConvo campaign, embodies this aesthetic style – it features soft colors, text fonts that convey authenticity, and pictures that lighten the serious nature of the topic (Figure 1). The topic of mental health is personal and impactful, and the infographic balances this gravity to make the topic approachable. The soft colors are inviting to users viewing the content, and the handwritten font of the text aims to make the content accessible and authentic. The “How To” heading makes it clear that this is an educational infographic, yet the content under the “Do...” and “Don’t...” headings are written in colloquial language, almost as if the content creator is speaking to its audience through the infographic. This conversational language evokes a sense of acceptance and comfort, which is enhanced by both the form and message. Thus, this style of aesthetic approachability and sincerity characterize the culture of mental health awareness online, and models both the branding of authenticity for influence and the unique aspects of visualizing the heavy topic of mental health.

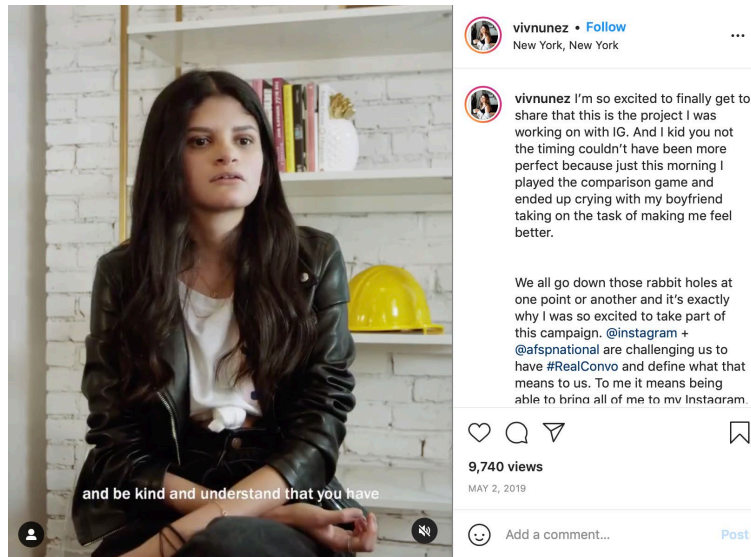
This aesthetic culture surrounding mental health on social media is largely driven by mental health or wellbeing influencers. These influencers are the epitome of self-branding. They leverage the enabling nature of social media and online fame to cultivate influence by strategically implementing compelling personal narratives into their online presence (Khamis et al., 2017). As micro-celebrities, influencers break down the traditional audience and performer dichotomy by branding themselves as accessible, authentic, and intimate figures (Marwick, 2016). However, no matter the level of micro-fame they achieve, they strategically continue interacting with their audience to boost their popularity (Marwick, 2016). Despite their

intentions, the edited nature of the influencers' digital displays of the authentic self can breed unhealthy standards. This consistent branding of authenticity requires influencers to constantly monitor the image of their authentic self, making this portrayal paradoxically edited and real (Marwick, 2013). Due to this act of self-branding, which is often visualized by their numerical following and fanbase, influencers' content and platform contribute heavily to the culture of visualization, which transcends into the realm of mental health visualization on social media. They become the prominent figures of the digital mental health community, and their aesthetic visualizations become templates that emerging mental health influencers follow. As exemplified with the sudden rise of the Cottagecore aesthetic on TikTok, common users who want to identify with an aesthetic community imitate the influencers' visual choices and styles of digital representation (Brand, 2021). The aesthetic portrayals that influencers conform to whilst self-identifying with a larger digital community thus governs the patterns in visualization that other users who identify with the community follow. This cyclical template is updated and redefined as the digital community and its aesthetics are rebranded and refined, making the prominent influencers in the community the aesthetic guides of the subculture. Thus, this rapidly shifting nature of aesthetic culture on social media has been solidified with the emergence of influencers.

The visual style of capturing approachability and sincerity is apparent in the personal images and videos of mental health influencers, who are the drivers of the digital culture surrounding mental health.

## **Figure 2**

*A Video on Vivian Nunez's Instagram Account for #RealConvo*



*Note.* This video is an interview-style narrative of the influencer's own experiences with mental health (Nunez, 2019).

This video features the mental health influencer Vivian Nunez talking about her own experiences and struggles with mental health (Figure 2). The video is shot in an interview-style setting and includes personal artifacts such as photos with family and a voice recording of the influencer. The interview is edited down to embody a conversation, where the audience only interacts with the influencer's image and voice. Because the viewers of this video will not explicitly feel the presence of the interviewer and the content producers, the audience leaves with a sense of personal connection with the influencer as if the video was part of a conversation. This feeling of personal closeness and understanding with the influencer embodies the self-branding of influencers as approachable figures that interact with their audience to solidify their influence (Marwick, 2016). The stylistic elements of the video, such as the personal photo of the influencer with their grandparent and the homey mise en scène of the clip, add to this sense of personal connection. The personal artifact creates a sense of intimacy with the audience, as if the influencer is sharing their deep personal stories about their family. The mise en scène, which is

positioned to make the audience feel as if they are in the influencer's personal space, is designed to convey the rapport between the influencer and their audience, working to transcend the traditional relationship between audience and performer (Marwick, 2016). This self-branding as an authentic and real figure of mental health awareness is communicated through the strategic editing of the original content. The aesthetic and stylistic choices of the influencer embody the conscious choice to appear approachable, in which the influencer paradoxically edits their content to seem real through the screen (Marwick, 2013). This appeals to a sense of authenticity and closeness that is central to the influencers' material success, as their allure is built on the ways they give the impression of an exclusive and intimate exchange with their audiences and the followers are in turn given an insider view into the genuine, raw, and usually inaccessible aspects of an influencer's personal life (Abidin, 2015). This conformity to the self-branding style of approachability allows the influencer to self-identify as a mental health influencer, and thus drive the digital culture surrounding mental health. By creating the aesthetic content style of conveying authenticity whilst emphasizing the deeply personal nature of mental health issues, influencers can self-catalogue themselves as mental health awareness advocates. The culmination of this act of self-cataloguing results in the influencers creating and evolving the culture of mental health visualization on social media. The curation of specific visualizations that embody this authenticity and realness cyclically drives the culture and visuals surrounding mental health online.

Along with being the creators of social media culture, influencers are also the driving force of disseminating content — which includes mental health awareness content. This power to disseminate information has been bestowed on the influencers by capitalistic marketing tactics that take advantage of the sense of personal connection that comes with the self-branding of

authenticity. The modern culture of celebrating individualism and self-promotion enables social media to encourage self-branding, because of its communicative and capitalistic capabilities (Khamis et al., 2017). The contemporary economic, social, and technological processes accommodate and reward this style of message-management (Khamis et al., 2017). This societal affirmation of self-branding allows influencers to hold prominence, influencing the dissemination of information. The phenomenon of self-branding is linked to the dominant ideologies of individual success, personal responsibility, and subjectivity to an economy that is ruled by consumeristic logic (Khamis et al., 2017). This transcendence of consumerist perspectives into information dissemination has empowered social media, and this consumerist orientation has contributed to the popularity of influencers as a driving force of information dissemination. The filter of authenticity they place on the online portrayal of their reality shapes the ways the audience interacts, perceives, and idolizes the influencers – which in this case is profitable for the mental health influencers yet detrimental for the audiences' perceptions of mental health and wellness, allowing them to contribute to the digital cycle of capitalism. The influencers are further validated for their inherent capitalism by brand partnerships and income that comes from having power over people. For example, in the beauty and fashion realm, brands such as Benefit Cosmetics and Boohoo have taken Instagram influencers to free luxurious trips that allow influencers to promote the brand's items whilst creating perfectly curated content (Carbone, 2018). These influencers receive an all-expensed trip, free products, and at times monetary compensation for the brand's usage of their crafted audio and visual content. This direct monetary compensation for selling the concept of self-branded authenticity grants the influencers more authority and power, and further motivates influencers to keep driving shifts in digital culture and mental health visualization by creating a larger quantity of stylistically

authentic, distinct, and self-branded content. The status of these influencers is not merely based on merit, but on self-promotion that arises from self-branding – the influencers and the power they hold over their audiences are merely a piece of the digital commodification system of the political economy and value creation of the social media industry (Marwick, 2013). The power of dissemination that these influencers hold emphasize the transformative effects of conversational and interactive social media, and the near-encompassing nature of marketing logic into areas of contemporary social life (Marwick, 2013).

This is apparent in the way the mental health awareness campaigns by Instagram utilize influencers to disseminate their message. The partnerships with the influencers are the primary vehicles of sharing the campaign. Each influencer has their own set of fans and followers who are heavily impacted by the messages that the influencer posts. This fanbase is apparent on Donte Colley's video post on the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention account, where multiple ordinary users have commented on this video in praise of this influencer (AFSP, 2019a). Whilst some comments simply consisted of positive emojis, other users commented heartfelt messages of support, such as "thank you Donte – for your inspiration to others and just for being you" and "inspiration to us all" (AFSP, 2019a). These comments depict the differences in the levels of emotional investment of each user in the influencer and their content. The demographics of an influencer's audience shift depending on the influencer's own demographics and topic of interest. By recruiting multiple influential figures from different disciplines, the campaign can be delivered to many audiences at once – reaching new audiences through accessing multiple influencers' followings (Carbone, 2018).

This capitalistic base of an influencer and their audience demographics is apparent through the act of collaborations. By collaborating with each other, influencers utilize each

other's popularity – which equates to monetary power through the integration of marketing tactics in furthering their individual brand – to recruit new audiences and increase their own following (Marwick, 2013). By branding these collaborations as friendly partnerships, the influencers can leverage the loyalty of their audiences to increase each other's overall following and popularity. Therefore, the more influencers can capitalize through audience loyalty – and the combinations of these loyal audiences – the more their digital monetary power goes up. This ties into brand partnerships and endorsements, where the influencer is paid to promote a certain brand or product. The influencers' digital monetary power is calculated through the number of visible followers or subscribers they have on their platforms, and the audience's loyalty is tangibly estimated through the monetary labels of price per follower (Degreef, 2019). This monetary power is further proven through the status of the influencers, such as the number of brand endorsements, the brands they collaborate with, and the duration and depth of this collaboration. This system digitally contributes to a capitalist cycle that equates popularity to monetary power. This direct link between online popularity and marketing tactics, and thus financial influence and power, is the intersection between capitalistic marketing logic and contemporary social life (Marwick, 2013).

### **Critiquing Capitalistic Social Media Systems and Performativity**

#### **The Systemic Problems of Social Media**

Aside from influencer notability, the campaign also utilizes the algorithm to disseminate its message. Because this message is being relayed by Instagram, the corporation that owns the rights to the algorithm, this campaign has the potential to effectively utilize the algorithm's system to push the content to a wide audience. Despite the common understanding that it is an objective information curation system, the algorithm enforces discriminatory societal norms.



Instead of being mathematical functions within a wider information system, they are subject to human biases, and reflect the ideologies of the people that design them and the corporations that support its development (Noble, 2018). The creators of these oppressive algorithms, who are often situated in Silicon Valley, affirm their own perspectives as rich, young, White men who are in positions of power by influencing the algorithm based on their biases (Noble, 2018). This biased agenda is supported by the technological monopolies, since these oppressive systems accelerate profit – much like how White privilege has been beneficial for capitalism on a societal level (Noble, 2018). The information curated by these algorithms are not neutral because the creators have implemented their own ideologies into this code. This can devastatingly impact people who are already marginalized by institutional racism and sexism. Since its initial development, the algorithm has become fundamental in the information curation operations of the internet. The constant stream of content it provides acts as stimulation to its users, and the endless flow of content further captivates users within this information flow. The continued use of this oppressive system, which often goes unnoticed due to its seemingly objective nature, thus further marginalizes minority communities by producing discriminatory search results and biasing content promotion.

The monopolized technological corporations that control the social media industry, along with the algorithms that dictate this, greatly benefit from the further development of complex algorithms. Because these discriminatory algorithms bring profit, similar to the oppressive institutional systems of the physical world, the corporations either willfully neglect the oppressive aspects of the algorithm or find value in a racist and sexist profit imperative (Noble, 2018). Therefore, the algorithm is not a neutral and objective decision-making tool, but an oppressive system with discrimination fundamentally embedded in its code.

Despite this foundational flaw, these mental health awareness campaigns are shared and disseminated through the algorithmic push, where the algorithm recommends and pushes content onto users' feeds or pages. To make this push, the algorithm can rely on two aspects: user preferences and corporate intent. Since the algorithm breaks down users' content preferences into biased mathematical code to recommend similar content, it holds the potential to learn from each individual user and push content based on these preferences for more engagement on each post. It will also act upon the corporate intent, as the algorithm is owned by the corporation producing the content, to show the campaign to more individuals for engagement and interactions. The utilization of these two methods, however, can work in contrast to the mental health awareness campaigns' purpose of raising awareness in completely new audiences – linking to the potential performative aspects of these campaigns.

An exemplary of the algorithm's work is the Instagram Explore Page. This page, which is one of the core functions of Instagram, pushes an endless supply of tailored content to each user, regardless of demand. The page, which produces new content to view each time a user refreshes their page, is constantly available to provide more content for the user. This utilization of the algorithm, where the object is not simply inanimate, mirrors the addictive methods of machine gambling in Las Vegas (Schüll, 2014). When objects are more than mere property and matter as much as subjects, such as in the case of both machine gambling and algorithms on social media, addiction becomes a relationship that is developed through repeated interaction between object and subject (Shaffer, 1996). The repeated interactions between user and algorithm, which can be pronounced through engagement with content through likes, comments, and shares, nurtures a relationship that can grow into addiction. By tapping into this relationship, the users' aims shift from winning to continuing – which when applied to algorithms is a change from the aim of

finding specific information into continuing to browse through a stream of information (Schüll, 2014). This shift puts users into a “zone” in which the concepts of time, space, and identity are suspended by the synthesis of individual technologies to produce one single experience (Schüll, 2014). This “zone” is experienced because of the shift in the purpose of the addictive relationship between object and subject, whether the object be a gambling machine or an algorithmic social media page. This suspension of anything and everything outside the screen produces a sensation of escape and numbness, to the point of experiencing the “zone” as if one climbed into the screen and got lost (Schüll, 2014). This sensation is the fuel to the addictive relationship, as it repeatedly invites users back to the object to stay in the enticing “zone” where nothing else matters (Schüll, 2014). This repeated engagement, which in the realm of social media manifests in interactions with the post, creates a “zone” where navigating the constant flow of information provided by the algorithm grows into an addictive yet comforting sensation.

For the corporations, nurturing this addiction to the oppressive algorithm is a profit imperative. These systems are built based on biased and discriminatory perspectives and work in the favor of capitalism. The oppressive methods built on majority privilege reflect the physical economic models of capitalism, and thus are profit-bearing (Orlowski, 2020). This systematic encapsulation of attention, which translates into clicks and interactions, provide profit for these social media corporations (Orlowski, 2020). Because each click, like, comment, or share becomes a concrete action that produces profit, these corporations grow dependent on the addiction of its users to generate money. The social media corporations will thus encourage more divisive, discriminatory, and oppressive algorithms, and in return sacrifice the wellbeing of its users in the name of capitalistic profit (Orlowski, 2020). For these corporations, this notion of profit outweighs the negative effects this addiction could have on its users – making them

intentionally ignore calls for a more positive social media space. This corporate blindness towards restorative action is portrayed in Facebook's neglect towards the fact that their platform had a negative impact on teen girls' mental health (Wells et al., 2021). There were no reported initiatives that aimed to combat these negative impacts on teenage mental health, and instead Facebook was planning to further capitalize off a younger population through the creation of Facebook Kids (Wells & Horowitz, 2021). These social media monoliths are thus highly aware of the devastating individual impacts that an addictive, discriminatory, and corporate algorithm can have, especially on vulnerable and societally oppressed populations – yet takes no action for the sake of a capitalistic profit imperative.

### **Advocacy and Performative Endorsement**

The social media corporations' systems for capturing of user attention, and the capitalist intentions behind this, bring into question the purpose behind creating these mental health awareness campaigns. To have audiences receive and decode a message from disseminated content, the message must first be perceived to be meaningful discourse (Hall, 1973). Through sponsorship and the consequent labeling of content as sponsored, audiences can perceive awareness campaigns and its messages to be legitimate and meaningful. By explicitly labeling content as sponsored, corporations can communicate that a message is important – increasing the likelihood of affecting audiences. However, this allows for frequent misclassifications of messages, as even if the aim of the message is blurred or ingenuine, the sponsorship label will communicate to audiences that the message is important. There can thus be a fundamentally performative aspect to propelling a sponsored public health advocacy campaign through corporate pages within an algorithm.

The algorithm learns from users' preferences to recommend the most relevant and attention-capturing content. This endless stream of content aims to captivate and situate users within the algorithm, thus fostering addiction to this constant flow of stimulation. Since the algorithm, which acts upon corporate intent, recommends content based on users' inclinations, we can conclude that the users who are most likely to interact with the mental health awareness campaign based on algorithmic suggestions are those who are already interested in the topic of mental health. Based on this structure, it is doubtful if this method of algorithmic dissemination is truly productive in raising mental health awareness. This structure would result in many user interactions and thus numerical results in the form of impressions, likes, and shares — but it would not achieve the campaign's goal of raising mental health awareness. This campaign must serve its educational purpose to inform, resonate, and positively change attitudes towards mental health. To raise awareness about mental health issues, the campaign and its message must be communicated to those users who are not familiar with mental health issues.

In this way, the algorithm's machine-learning technique does not aid the mental health awareness campaign's true purpose. However, as the commissioner and owner of the algorithm, social media corporations have an extensive understanding on the inner functions and methods of this system. Thus, the social media corporations must know that its algorithm is not the most effective tool in raising mental health awareness in those who are unaware or have negative inclinations towards the topic.

Due to social media platforms' known negative impacts on the mental health of its users, the true purpose of Instagram's promotion of mental health awareness could potentially be to reverse the negative images of its product (Wells et al., 2021). As reiterated with the self-branding of influencers, each brand has certain connotations attached to it. The corporate

promotion of mental health awareness could be to develop the image that Instagram values mental wellness, which is contradictory to its actual inner priorities. This corporate advocacy for mental health would thus be performative, aiming to enhance brand image rather than further the cause. This endorsement would aim to undermine the actual mental health issues that the platform causes, rather than champion advocacy.

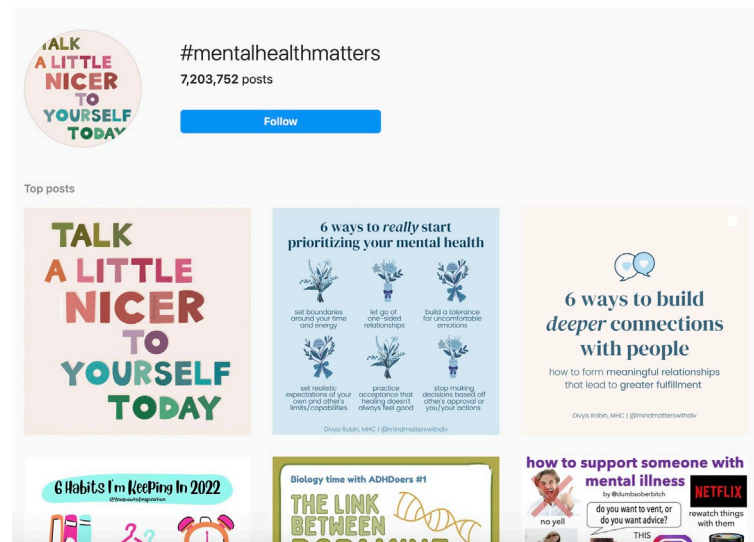
The utilization of influencers to propel these mental health awareness campaigns contributes to the performativity of these corporate initiatives. These influencers and advocacy organizations are paid by social media conglomerates to disseminate the awareness campaign. This insertion of monetary compensation into the campaign presents an opportunity for these campaigns to be performative, and appeal to unethical intentions. The lure of monetary compensation and public endorsement from these social media corporations will be very appealing for many to further their self-brand, and thus their online status and popularity. Because of this enticement, there can be a blur to the intentions of agreeing to promote this campaign, thus opening the channel for performative endorsement. This intersection of capitalistic motivation and public advocacy towards a public health cause leaves room for influencers and organizations seeking performative endorsement to further their brand.

Because of the individualistic tendencies of contemporary capitalist society, these social media campaigns can encourage other everyday users to also capitalize from this campaign by sharing and adding their own content to this momentum. This is apparent through the way non-profit organizations have shifted their digital ways of advocacy from a one-way transmission of information into an interactive conversation (Seelig et al., 2019). It also transcends into the usage of hashtags, which is powerful due to its participatory nature (Saxton et al., 2015). The hashtag system is a decentralized user-generated organization system, which allows individual accounts

to link their content to existing aesthetics and communities to further identify with a topic and style. This community engagement element of hashtags can categorize content even within the overall mental health and wellbeing aesthetic, with subsections spanning from public education, values, and branding (Saxton et al., 2015).

### Figure 3

*A Screenshot of an Instagram Search of #MentalHealthMatters*



*Note.* A feed of posts that are classified under the hashtag *#MentalHealthMatters*, which exemplifies the aesthetic style of the topic of mental health on Instagram. (Instagram, 2021). For example, within the aesthetic topic of mental health, content surrounding the subsection of self-love is classified with *#SelfLoveisTheBestLove* (946K Posts), content that educates others about recovering from mental health issues is classified under *#MentalHealthRecovery* (1.3M Posts), and content that falls under the umbrella topic of mental health is often classified with *#MentalHealthMatters* (7.2M Posts) (Figure 3). The participatory element of adding momentum to a campaign or cause by contributing content to a hashtag increases the overall publicity of campaigns, as it contributes to the numerical result of the campaign – which on social media, can equate to monetary or social power (Saxton et al., 2015). This participatory social media culture

transcends the realm of awareness campaigns and into general content sharing, where people actively engage with and share digital content to further build the visibility of the awareness campaign (Seelig et al., 2019). However, this acceleration of mental health awareness campaigns is rooted in the performative intention of self-branding. Similar to how influencer collaborations aim to increase digital and monetary power through combining audiences, this contribution mechanism instead allows for everyday users to further their own personal social media brand, image, and aesthetic.

This capitalistic and individualistic advancement of self-branding is encouraged by the influencers and organizations that are a part of the campaign (Seelig et al., 2019). Through the engage, impress, and share model that is taken by non-profit organizations, influencers and organizations interact with supporters in useful, interesting, and informative manners to encourage the sharing of new content (Seelig et al., 2019). This is accelerated by the loyalty that audiences may hold towards these influencers and organizations, as adding to the content of the campaign presents chances to be recognized by their favorite creators through re-posts and re-sharing of user-generated content (Seelig et al., 2019). These gratifications can encourage active members to start conversations, share, or repost to further disseminate the message of the awareness campaigns. This collective rallying by the influencers and organizations makes users consider themselves as advocates for these causes and entities that create these campaigns, which aids the entities' digital and monetary status through the explicit numerical strength that these user contributions generate (Seelig et al., 2019). These entities thus conduct rigorous social listening on real-time conversations to discover opportunities for further user engagement, allowing these user contributions to be utilized for marketing purposes (Seelig et al., 2019). This is apparent in the ways non-profit organizations facilitated interaction with individuals who



listened, engaged, and responded to their content on social media, and the ways in which these entities diligently work to keep audiences interested in engaged – which includes partnerships with key influencers, businesses, or brands with loyal supporters who are willing to involve themselves in the cause (Seelig et al., 2019).

Because the campaign content is sponsored by the social media corporation that owns the rights to the algorithm, they will inherently be prioritized and further pushed by the algorithm. This ensures that this campaign will be prioritized by the discriminatory algorithm and pushed to encourage engagement with the campaign – making sure that the influencers and organizations get the exposure that is promised from taking part in the campaign. This guaranteed level of public exposure, and corresponding lure of endorsing the campaign to further self-brand and image for enhanced popularity, can attract those who aim to participate in this campaign for the performative purpose of increased online status instead of wholeheartedly advocating for mental health issues.

The recent insights from Meta’s internal documents by the *Wall Street Journal* show that the corporation has acknowledged yet continued to ignore the problem that Instagram is correlated to negative self-images and overall worsened mental health (Wells et al., 2021). This recent illumination, and the corporations’ longtime willful ignorance, contradicts the purpose of their mental health awareness campaigns. This raises the question of the true purpose of these campaigns, which were promoted long before these facts of neglect were publicized, and if they were made to undermine the negative effects that their platforms have on users’ mental health. These campaigns could have served to cover the fact that their platform was detrimental to this public health cause, or to enhance their brand image in the realm of mental wellbeing and self-care. This performative aspect of raising awareness for this topic puts the true intentions behind

these campaigns into question. If the corporations were aiming to appear as if mental health was a priority within their algorithm, and performatively disseminating this image to its users to encourage positive brand image and alignment, these campaigns would not be beneficial for those struggling with mental health issues. This mismatch between the awareness campaigns' aims of reducing stigma towards mental health issues for public good and the capitalistic nature of the corporations that commission these campaigns hints that this advocacy is in fact performative and serves only to enhance brand image.

### **Raising Awareness about Algorithmic Vulnerabilities**

#### **A Vulnerable Population Case Study: Third Culture Kids**

Within this rapidly shifting digital space, the population of third culture kids are especially vulnerable to losing themselves within the algorithm and its ideological inclinations. As previously stated, third culture kids are those who identify with multiple cultures and locations due to their nomadic upbringing of constantly relocating around the globe for their parents' work (Pollock et al. 2017). Because they are never situated within a singular culture or location, third culture kids are increasingly dependent on online communication avenues such as social media to stay connected with their loved ones. This heightened dependency on social media to stay connected can thus breed and foster addiction to social media and its algorithm. Because increased social media platform consumption is profitable to the social media corporations, the companies will utilize the algorithm to promote increased usage of social media platforms, thus simultaneously encouraging psychological addiction (Orlowski, 2020). Due to the algorithm's addictive nature, this can deeply situate third culture kids in the "zone" and crave more content to stay in this space (Schüll, 2014).

Because this population is more mobile, third culture kids would be dependent on social media to keep in contact with their social circles – making them more susceptible to being heavily absorbed in and dependent on social media and its systems. This necessary dependency on social media sites to maintain their global social life is affirmed by four interviews with individuals who self-identified as third culture kids. When asked if they were dependent on social media, all four interviewees<sup>1</sup> stated that they considered themselves dependent on social media. Alex stated that they could not imagine communicating with their close friends and family without social media. They suggested that if it were not for the sense of constant connectivity that social media provides, they may not have gone to college far away from their family, who are currently in Singapore. Maria also depends on social media to maintain close relationships with their friends and family. They reported truly grasping their dependency during times when they did social media cleanses, where they stayed off social media to cut back on their excessive usage of the platforms. Despite this cleanse supposedly being positive for their mental health, they felt disconnected from their friends, family, and the rest of the world because they did not have the tools to easily communicate without social media.

Sam also reported that social media was integral in keeping in touch with friends and family throughout their moves across Southeast Asia. Sam emphasized that third culture kids tend to have to put in effort when staying connected with friends, which can sometimes be disheartening. However, Sam tries to view this positively, and says that the commitment to staying in touch through social media can strengthen relationships, as it tangibly shows that people want to maintain friendships despite the challenges in doing so. Sam also recognized the harms of social media, especially in the ways it allows for direct visual comparison. They were at

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the individuals have been changed to protect their identities.

times apprehensive about how their own identity and relationships should look like, as they saw how others portrayed their own lives and relationships, and unknowingly started to draw direct comparisons to their own life. Maya is also cautious of their social media dependency, and in fact intentionally does not engage with many mainstream social media platforms to combat negative comparisons. Maya believes that social media should make people feel better than before they interacted with it – which they recognize is not the case, especially for them.

Although they understand the curated nature of content on social media, they reported feeling emptier after spending time on social media and feeling hollow after the inescapable comparisons between themselves and the highly edited photos of others. However, despite their limited usage, they still feel dependent on social media to communicate with their friends and family. They actively use KakaoTalk, an essential social media site in Korea, to keep in touch with their friends and family. Their experiences reiterate that third culture kids are inherently dependent on social media to actively communicate with friends and family, even if they are avoidant and wary of its systems. The nomadic and physically distant nature of these third culture kids' close relationships require that they must be present on the digital realm of social media to maintain and nurture their intimate connections.

This heightened dependency could put third culture kids at risk of not only addiction to the algorithm, but also to mental health issues. As outlined in the *Wall Street Journal* Facebook Files, usage of social media was linked to worsened mental health and body image in teenage girls (Wells et al., 2021). This can be deeply situated with the third culture kid population, especially during the vulnerable periods of adolescence, where heightened usage of social media could be linked to worsened mental health. A study looking at the relationship between social media usage and depression revealed that social media consumption was associated with the

development of depression in a six-month follow-up period (Primack et al., 2020). This finding illuminates the effects that social media usage could have on mental health, and that increased usage would present vulnerabilities to depression and other mental health issues. The third culture kid population is fundamentally vulnerable to existential losses of identity, home, safety, and trust due to their migratory lifestyle (Gilbert, 2008). This instability, intersected with the heightened dependency towards social media and its effects on mental health, could result in an increased vulnerability to mental health issues. Due to these confounding aspects, third culture kids are vulnerable to algorithmic addiction and consequent mental health issues. This population could thus be a group of interest when considering the improvement of mental health awareness campaigns on social media, and the systemic changes in social media that must happen for this shift in awareness campaigns to occur.

### **Algorithmic Addiction – What Now?**

This paper establishes the problematic aspects of the culture, promotions, and visualizations surrounding digital conversations about mental health awareness, which can be attributed to the larger systemic problems of social media algorithms, platforms, and corporations. The implications of the issues surrounding the discriminatory and oppressive social media systems can trickle down to impact vulnerable populations, such as the third culture kid population. As depicted by the inherent dependency on social media of third culture kids, social media usage is now an integral part of modern life. There must thus be a recognition of the essential nature of social media, and a reconciliation between its discriminatory aspects and its ability to connect individuals.

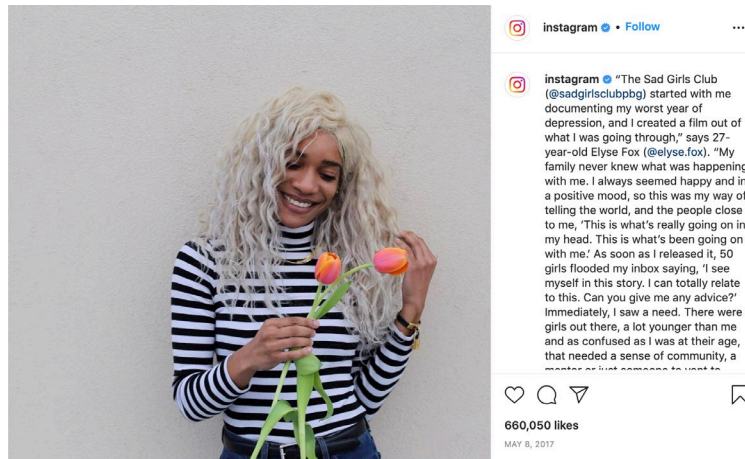
To resolve these negative aspects and structures of social media, these corporate and capitalistic systems must change for the better. The systemic problems of social media, including

the discriminatory and oppressive nature of the algorithm and the addictive nature of social media structures, are all rooted in capitalistic ideologies of profit-inducing strategies. However, when leveraged to its fullest extent, social media can play a key role in encouraging communication and interaction amongst users online and even offline (Seelig et al., 2019). The social media technology offers an unprecedented degree of selectivity in terms of information, innovative expression, and resources (Seelig et al., 2019). By decentralizing these social media platforms from capitalistic practices and focusing solely on the true communicative benefits of social media, the harmful aspects of the platforms could be eradicated. For example, in terms of information curation, the search engine acts as a monopolized portal and broker for information (Noble, 2018). By decentralizing and decolonizing this software by utilizing more niche, specialized information engines that cater to specific needs, such as a specialized search engine or library, the capitalistic aspects that result from a centralized information curation system would be diminished (Noble, 2018). In the realm of social media, this could manifest in systems that only serve content from individual users that an account has actively decided to follow – and thus do not display additional content that serves to captivate and capitalize.

The accessibility to these more decentralized and subversive information systems, however, is often disproportionate. This is most explicitly seen in the form of language on social media. This inequality can be seen even in *#HereForYou* and *#RealConvo*, where the campaign details and examples are all scribed in English.

#### **Figure 4**

*A Post on the Instagram Corporate Account for #HereForYou*



*Note.* A post by Instagram on their official corporate page (446M Followers) that promotes the *#HereForYou* campaign with a photo of influencer Elyse Fox (Instagram, 2017).

The perspective that English is the global “common” language is a very Westernized and Eurocentric view of the world. Instagram’s post, and thus campaign, affirms this by creating a caption only in English for this photo – and not offering the caption in any other language (Figure 4). The campaign also only recruited English-speaking influencers and ambassadors, reflecting this linguistic bias towards dominant Western methods. Despite this, the content was disseminated through Instagram’s global corporate account, which is followed by users around the globe. This explicit prioritization of English also reflects the worldview of the powerful men in technology situated in Silicon Valley and their dominant ideologies and practices, which is reflected not only in the algorithm, but the fundamental linguistic structures of their product (Noble, 2018). Some may argue that the translation function of Instagram makes up for this biased structure. However, these translation systems are also created and commissioned by the same powerful White men in technology who code oppressive algorithms, and the computer-generated translations thus do not reflect the cultural considerations and nuances of each language that are needed for a comprehensive translation (Noble, 2018). This linguistic bias that is present in the fundamental systems and structures of Instagram is representative of the larger

bias towards Western ideologies in social media, and thus the unequal access of online resources for those who do not fit the mold of Westernization.

By exploiting the convenience of these mass information brokerage engines, social media corporations can capture its users in a capitalistic, dependent system of information and connectivity. To subvert this narrative, the hurdles of accessing existing decentralized systems and educating others about the oppressiveness of these algorithms and social media systems must be surpassed. Some powerful figures in the industry must raise their voices, such as what Facebook's whistleblower Frances Haugen has done, for this departure from ingraining capitalistic ideologies into social life to commence.

This theoretical analysis of mental health awareness campaigns on social media, and the systemic injustices that drive these campaigns, has some limitations. The Instagram campaigns *#HereForYou* was launched in 2017 and *#RealConvo* was created in 2019, making them relatively outdated within the constant stream of social media content. On social media, trends come and go very quickly, and it is extremely difficult to keep up with the visualizations of this culture, as its characteristics feed off its creators and is thus everchanging. This constantly evolving nature must also be considered when advocating for systemic change within the social media platforms and conglomerates.

The existing social media platforms and systems play into the larger societal problems of inequality and oppression for the sake of profit. By fostering dependency on technology to maintain social connections, as depicted in the third culture kid population, social media corporations generate profit, and thus further sustains this addictive and maladaptive model. The mental health awareness campaigns on Instagram exemplify this, as it mobilizes influencers and everyday users to feed into the cycle of self-branding for popularity and monetization – despite



championing a public health cause that hinders this rhythm of profit. The dichotomy of promoting mental health awareness on a platform that exploits maladaptive addiction is backed by a larger systemic profit imperative. To break through this capitalistic grip on social media and its connective capabilities, we must educate audiences on the corporate intentions behind algorithmic structures to illuminate the discriminatory and oppressive ideologies that are fundamentally imbedded in these systems.

### **Persuading a Vulnerable Population: Third Culture Kids**

#### **Persuasive Awareness Campaigns and Calls to Action**

Most advertising and public relations campaigns, which ultimately aim to further the capitalistic endeavors of businesses, are rooted in calls to action that encourage audience engagement and responses. Unlike traditional media campaigns, which often aim to drive purchases or enhance brand image, the impetus of an awareness campaign is to persuade viewers to recognize and educate themselves to better understand a topic; despite being a persuasive media object, this makes awareness campaigns differ from other advertising or public relations campaigns because they serve to change the attitudes of a wider community. The purpose of mental health awareness campaigns is to persuade audiences to take action to further this public health cause – leading to a need for a specific call to action. This makes awareness campaigns heavily reliant on the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion theorizes the mechanisms of attitude changes when processing strategically placed stimuli that aims to persuade. This model proposes two main routes of persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route. When viewing appeals to the central route, we carefully process the information that is provided to cognitively build our attitude. This would entail questioning the credentials of the messenger, evaluating arguments,

and looking into its supporting claims. When viewing appeals to the peripheral route, we do not carefully evaluate the information that is provided, but hastily rely on key heuristics to build our attitude. This would entail assessing arguments through heuristics such as buzz or key words, message length, and celebrities or authority figures. Most awareness campaigns utilize the peripheral route of persuasion because its audiences are not actively evaluating the message of the campaign at the time of consumption. The peripheral route is prevalent in awareness campaigns in the media, as these messages are often delivered in moments where audience attention levels are low, such as advertisement slots on television or social media. This explains why many media campaigns employ buzzwords and partnerships with influencers and credible organizations to contribute to its message length and likeability, thus showcasing the validity of the cause and invigorating action. The peripheral cues are particularly salient in awareness campaigns on social media, where these representations of reliability and trustworthiness of the argument are conveyed through audio and visual methods to persuade audiences to act upon the cause.

Amongst these peripheral cues, emotions also heavily factor into persuasive stimuli (Petty & Briñol, 2015). Because persuasive stimuli such as public health campaigns tend to champion an emotive and societally important cause, emotions serve as important tools to motivate not only ambivalent audiences but also viewers who are passionate about the cause. When the extent of thinking is low, such as during times of mindless scrolling through social media, emotions can work in concert with other peripheral processes to alter people's attitudes to become consistent with the valence of the emotion (Petty & Briñol, 2015). On the contrary, when the extent of thinking is high, emotions can serve an argumentative purpose for a proposal, especially if they enhance the merit of advocacy or favorably bias thinking before the delivery of

the main message (Petty & Briñol, 2015). When the extent of thinking is high and thus appeals to the central route, emotions can lead to careful judgements about the suggested attitude, as emotions lead to affective and cognitive validation of thoughts (Petty & Briñol, 2015). This mechanism is favorable for awareness campaigns as the proposed attitude changes are socially valuable. When the extent of thinking is low and thus appeals to the peripheral route, emotions influence the audience's level of thought towards the message (Petty & Briñol, 2015). These existing theoretical frameworks of persuasion are applicable to the persuasiveness of awareness campaigns, highlighting the most salient tactics for raising awareness about mental health on social media.

There are persuasion methods that are especially effective in the context of awareness campaigns in the media. Guadagno et al. (2013) examined the impact of likeability and social validation on the willingness to comply through the lens of the digital medium. This study highlighted the effects of digitality on persuasive techniques. Unlike traditional persuasion research, the likeability of the disseminator of the online message did not have a significant effect on compliance (Guadagno et al., 2013). Instead, the level of social validation of the message held a significant effect on compliance, suggesting that not all persuasion techniques are equally effective across all modes of communication (Guadagno et al., 2013). This research is applicable when evaluating the different dissemination methods of awareness campaigns online. On social media platforms, awareness campaign content is shared by the initial content creator and further disseminated by other users through word of mouth or content repurposing. This suggests that the effects of these awareness campaigns can differ based on the social validation of the cause, and does not necessarily depend on whom the users obtain this information from. Because mental health is currently a popular topic on social media, interacting with this public

health issue is socially validating for users, thus increasing the effects of mental health awareness campaigns. These findings suggest that digital methods, specifically social media, can be an effective platform to disseminate mental health awareness campaigns.

A frequently utilized structure for awareness campaigns is the “myths and facts” contrast, which debunks myths about a specific cause or topic to increase knowledge. However, this strategy was deemed ineffective when reducing mental health stigma related to the dimensions of avoidance, perceived danger, and responsibility (Dobson & Wolf, 2021). This awareness campaign approach had no effect on feelings of avoidance or responsibility towards mental health but increased the perceived danger surrounding mental health issues – contradicting the purpose of an awareness campaign by reporting increased levels of stigma (Dobson & Wolf, 2021). This research indicates that the *#HereForYou* and *#RealConvo* awareness campaigns have the potential to be effective, as they deviate from this popular “myths and facts” structure by utilizing of influencers.

### ***Region and Culture Specific Calls to Action***

To encourage audiences to adhere to these calls to action, mental health awareness campaigns must point their audiences to a specific action that they can take to contribute to the cause. Because these calls to action tend to direct viewers to location-specific materials, such as national hotlines or local resource lists, awareness campaigns tend to factor in regional or cultural aspects as the commonality between the audiences. This consideration of audience demographics is consistent with research on persuasive marketing tactics, which concluded that the indicators of gender, age, education, and income significantly influenced internet purchasing tendencies (Akhter, 2003). To maximize efficacy, mental health awareness campaigns must take its target audience and their characteristics into account. This consideration is apparent in

existing awareness campaigns. An analysis of mental health awareness content on Twitter for World Mental Health Awareness Day in 2019 found that social media functions as a peer-based information and support system (Saha et al., 2019). The media content of awareness campaigns thus should guide information seekers to useful content that can drive action, such as local organizations and resources.

Many media campaigns aim to direct the audience to local resources because of the socially insular nature of the cultural impacts on perceptions of mental health and the regionally tailored nature of these local organizations. This phenomenon is exhibited in some of the most widely acknowledged mental health awareness campaigns in the world, such as R U OK Day in Australia (R U OK, 2021) and U OK M8? in the United Kingdom (LADbible, 2021). In these national-level campaigns, the immediate support resource lists point to local organizations. By directing audiences to these culturally appropriate local organizations and resources, and thus catering their content to a specific region or culture, these mental health awareness campaigns effectively impact, reach, and ultimately persuade audiences.

This notion of tailoring campaigns to specific audiences and regions is visible in mental health awareness campaigns across the globe. In a study that exposed participants to a statewide anti-stigma campaign in California and examined the differences in the level of mental health stigma between racial-ethnic groups after the exposure, Asian American and Latinx participants who opted to report back in their native language displayed significantly higher levels of stigma (Wong et al., 2021). Despite being a regionally targeted campaign, this initiative was ineffective because it did not cater to the cultural and linguistic disparities in mental health knowledge in less acculturated individuals (Wong et al., 2021). This highlights that mental health awareness campaigns must cater to specific subpopulations and their cultural needs. There was a significant

lack of understanding in college students in India about mental health professionals and their roles, stifling the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns as they did not supplement the audience's lack of knowledge (Saha, 2018). This study suggests that for mental health awareness campaigns to be effective in specific regions, they must cater to the cultural gaps in knowledge and educate audiences whilst raising awareness. These findings highlight a need to target mental health campaigns both regionally and culturally to supplement the existing gaps about mental health.

The case that culturally focused mental health awareness campaigns are more effective reflects the differences in the conceptualizations of stress and mental health between cultures. In the Namibian Ovambo culture, mental illnesses are conceptualized differently to apply to the Ovambo cultural beliefs. For example, psychological distress can be conceptualized as Eemwngu – or madness – and its causes are believed to be rooted in indigenous bewitching or spirits (Bartholomew, 2017). Because cultural understandings of mental health can differ from the Western conceptualizations of mental health, the approaches towards reducing mental health stigma should cater to these differences as well.

The current mainstream biomedical conceptualizations of mental health are based on Western standards and theories (Cosgrove et al., 2021). To cater to all audiences, mental health awareness campaigns should adapt to fit cultural understandings of mental health that are different to mainstream Western theorizations. By considering culturally different conceptualizations in mental health awareness campaigns, the content would also be able to encompass culture-bound syndromes that are more recognized and prevalent in certain communities or cultures, such as the Japanese Taijin Kyoufushou or the Latinx Ataque de Nervios – making these campaigns culturally relevant to the target audience (Levine & Gaw,

1995). The current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders includes some culture-specific syndromes, but there must be more recognition and applications of culturally specific mental health issues. Cosgrove et al. (2021) coined a Move for Global Mental Health (MGMH) as a modern movement that must be branched out locally to increase awareness towards mental health issues on a global level. They theorized that mental health awareness campaigns must take a more rights-based and server-user activism approach to reflect real lived experiences and reconfigure the campaigns to match local conceptualizations of mental health (Cosgrove et al., 2021). When the World Psychiatric Association Programme implemented two anti-stigma projects for schizophrenia, they did so locally to focus on a specific community (Warner, 2005). They concluded that stigma reduction projects should target smaller groups, since focusing on the general public is not only expensive, but also unlikely to have a measurable impact. These projects were effective in reducing stigma due to its tailored nature (Warner, 2005). Thus, the research in this realm underscores the idea that mental health issues and treatments are more effective when catered to the local culture and its needs, even if they are a global public health cause.

### **Third Culture Kids and their Mental Health Needs**

The fact that the most effective mental health awareness campaigns are situated within a specific cultural space raises the question of their effectiveness on third culture kids, and their mental health needs. As previously defined, third culture kids are individuals who had a globally nomadic upbringing from relocating for their parents' opportunities (Pollock et al., 2017). Despite being a multicultural and growing population, there is an overall lack of research on third culture kids (Tan, 2021). Because of their experiences in shifting between multiple environments, third culture kids often identify with multiple cultures. However, because third

culture kids are frequently exposed to difficult transitions, identity development challenges, and the socio-emotional effects of shifting environments throughout their developmental years, they need extended support that caters to their heightened exposure to stress-inducing situations (Miller et al., 2020).

In foundational identity development literature, Marcia (1980) suggests that complications in identity development is connected to worsened psychological well-being. The fundamentally migratory experience of third culture kids leads this population to face more situations that could negatively affect their mental health, especially in conjunction with identity development complications. These developmental impacts on third culture kids are also dependent on the ages that an individual relocates. Cockburn's (2002) research suggests that there are significant relationships between the identity development struggles of third culture kids, the amount of time a third culture kid has spent outside their country of origin, and the developmental stage that the child has moved abroad. Within these tumultuous moments of relocation, the most unstable times were when the child is under five or in their adolescent years (Cockburn, 2002). For young third culture kids under five, significant environmental changes can collide with periods of building their security and developmental skills, causing identity difficulties (Cockburn, 2002). The stage of adolescence is a period of transition for all. However, since the turbulence in self-understanding occurs simultaneously with learning to live within different value systems and cultural traditions for third culture kids, this critical developmental period can heavily affect teenage third culture kids. (Cockburn, 2002). The literature in identity development affirms that change during these periods of vulnerability produces enhanced effects on the wellbeing of a child. Because periods of transition of moving into unfamiliar and unknown spaces can cause inherent disconnection, they can threaten one's identity and its



development (Hayden & Thompson, 2004). Married with the fact that third culture kids find it difficult to create lasting relationships or locate community support, this population is more prone to stress-inducing situations that cause identity development issues and thus negative psychological impacts (Sears, 2011).

Despite this frequency of negative psychological impact due to identity development disruption, the existing ethnic identity models are insufficient in explaining the development of third culture kids. Because of the nomadic and multi-cultural nature of this upbringing, the currently existing ethnic identity development models are not applicable to the third culture kid experience. Atkinson et al.'s (1979) Minority Identity Development Model outlines a successive progression of ethnic identity development – and its linear nature does not apply for third culture kids. The model outlines that individuals initially are in a conformity stage, where they assimilate to the dominant culture. At a certain point in their development, they experience an event that causes dissonance, which starts the progression of resistance and immersion, introspection, and synergetic articulation and awareness (Atkinson et al., 1979). However, for third culture kids, the event of dissonance can happen before the individual conforms to the dominant culture of their environment. Despite having achieved optimum identity awareness in one environment, third culture kids can be pushed back to the dissonance stage after relocating to a new environment. Third culture kids may also experience a limited capacity to explore their own ethnic or racial background, and therefore experience discrepancies with others of the same background – causing dissonance when they attempt to integrate into their own cultural background. These mismatches of this model with the third culture kid experience highlights that ethnic identity development is not linear, and instead must be cyclical or interlinked.

The two dimensions of commitment and exploration in the Ethnic Identity Development Model are also not sufficient in explaining third culture kid identity development (Phinney, 1993). Phinney's (1993) model conceptualizes ethnic identity development in these two dimensions, and categorizes individuals as in the stages of diffuse (no commitment or exploration), foreclosed (has committed but no exploration), moratorium (has explored but no commitment), and achieved (has committed and explored). This two-dimension model is not applicable for third culture kids, who are often placed in a position of commitment to their ethnic or racial identity without sufficient exploration. This situation often occurs when the third culture kid is vastly different from the rest of a homogenous population in a new environment. In these situations, they are forced to become representatives of their culture without ever internally examining their background – thus causing friction in their ethnic identity development. For third culture kids, moments of moratorium where individuals encounter situations that initiate their identity exploration may present themselves immediately after relocating. This sudden exposure can cause further stress, complicating the path to ethnic identity exploration and commitment.

Despite catering to a multicultural and multiracial experience, Poston's (1990) Biracial Identity Development Model also doesn't fully address the third culture kid experience. This model begins with a stage of personal identity that is independent of ethnic background, and transitions into the choice of group stage, where a biracial individual is confronted with choosing a background to identify with. Once the individual has decided to identify with a singular background, they experience the enmeshment and denial stage, where feelings of discomfort and guilt arises from this choice. Once these feelings are resolved, the biracial individual moves to the appreciation stage, where they seek information about their backgrounds and cultures. Lastly, individuals enter the stage of integration, which is marked by the individual's identification as

biracial or multiracial as a result of a positive blend of their backgrounds. Many components of this developmental model apply to third culture kids; for instance, consistent with this model, individuals initially hold a personal identity that is not linked with an ethnic or racial group, and experience conflict between expressing their heritages (Poston, 1990). However, unlike what is predicted by this model, the experience of identity development is not linear for third culture kids. As third culture kids relocate and acculturate to local customs, they continue absorbing cultural components, adding aspects to their identity. This means that third culture kids cycle back between each of the stages proposed in the Biracial Identity Development Model, continuing to integrate new cultures to their personal ethnic aspects as they relocate.

These existing models are insufficient in addressing the third culture kid population's needs and experiences. The common thread of linearity in these models does not apply to third culture kids, as constant relocation pressures them into minority positions, encountering unfamiliar environments and identities, and absorbing new cultures.

The impacts of a migratory lifestyle manifest in third culture kids often experiencing existential losses, particularly in the realms of safety and trust, home, and deriving meaning from the various aspects of themselves (Gilbert, 2008). Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) attributes the construction of an ethnic or racial identity to normative development and positive youth adjustment, putting into question the psychological, academic, and health outcomes of adolescents who experience a more turbulent period of adolescence. Since adolescence is a period of increased adjustment and purpose-searching around the complexities of ethnic and racial group membership, those with complications in adolescence can experience negative mental health outcomes (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). The individually different yet fundamental aspect of relocation can enhance disconnection and vulnerability in third culture kids, making the

existing ethnic identity development models incongruent with this population. There may not be an existing theoretical ethnic identity development model that caters directly to the third culture kid experience, but the development of an ethnic and racial identity during adolescence is nevertheless crucial for positive psychological wellbeing.

However, some studies contradict the widely acknowledged concept that third culture kids face more turbulence in their developmental stages. Abe (2018) suggested that adult third culture kids display normative shifts in personality and wellbeing. Instead of these turbulent experiences impacting them negatively, this study suggested that adult third culture kids had more adaptive and resilient cognitive and affective styles, contradicting the findings of other literature examining third culture kids (Abe, 2018). Despite these findings, there are no studies that further support this claim, and these findings could instead represent that the positive outcomes of the third culture kid experience do not present until well into adulthood. Although third culture kids may experience the positive impacts of their migratory lifestyle after learning to constantly adapt, this does not negate the fact that third culture kids face identity development challenges and turbulence during their upbringing.

The identity development complications that third culture kids must cope with during their development years, and the negative impacts on their mental health it can harbor, make awareness and education about mental health awareness essential in this population. The absence of stability in third culture kids' upbringing creates stress-inducing experiences, highlighting the need to promote mental health awareness in this vulnerable population (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). Thus, mental health awareness campaigns on social media should target this vulnerable population to educate third culture kids about ways to deal with the negative mental health impacts of their upbringing.

### ***Targeting Third Culture Kids***

The cultural nuances that surround the topic of mental health heavily emphasize the need for mental health awareness campaigns to cater to audiences from different regional or cultural backgrounds. Because of the societal stigmas around mental health issues, audiences will have different levels of exposure and knowledge about this topic. The campaigns must be tailored to the different needs of each audience group to supplement gaps in knowledge and effectively promote action and positive attitude change, which was seen even between racial groups in a sample of male college students in the United States (Rafal et al., 2018). To quantitatively reach the most people, many mental health awareness campaigns tend to focus on local majority group audiences as their locus. This leads to minority groups often missing the target audience bracket of these regionally or culturally targeted campaigns that appeal to specific backgrounds, characteristics, or circumstances. As a globally transcending yet locally sparse population, third culture kids are never a majority; they are thus never a priority target for these mental health awareness campaigns.

There is a general gap in psychological research about third culture kids and the further implications of their developmental complications. Despite this lack in psychological research, this growing population is becoming increasingly crucial due to further globalization. As this population is scattered across the globe, reaching third culture kids through existing persuasive media artifacts that pertain to a specific geographic location can be difficult. There is an exception to the regional and cultural specificity of mental health awareness campaigns – the campaigns created by globally prominent digital corporations. These campaigns, especially in the realm of social media, are created to be disseminated within a digital sphere, and thus transcend the obstacles of national borders. The effectiveness of locally and culturally targeted

campaigns has already been empirically suggested, putting into question the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns on social media. Despite not being an effective method of raising mental health awareness in targeted regions or cultures, these campaigns present an opportunity to cater to an audience who fundamentally transcends the category of nation groups – third culture kids. By examining the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns on social media, this study may contribute to the research conducted on this understudied population and present insights into how the third culture kid experience can impact attitude change.

### **A Study of Campaign Efficacy**

#### **Study Overviews and Specifics**

The proposed study will examine the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns in media on stigma reduction in third culture kids. It will measure if existing global mental health awareness campaigns are effective in combating mental health stigma in third culture kids. This initiative is important because third culture kids are more prone to facing life events that could negatively affect their mental health (Purnell & Hoban, 2014). This quasi-experimental study will be conducted through a series of self-report surveys: one before and one immediately after viewing a mental health awareness campaign, and a follow-up survey two weeks after viewing the mental health awareness campaign.

To assess the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns on social media, the study will examine levels of mental health stigma as a dependent variable. In male college students, differences in help-seeking behavior were attributed to the psychosocial factors of personal experiences with mental health, societal norms, and mental health stigma (Rafal et al., 2018). The variable of levels of mental health stigma will thus assess if the campaign was effective in positively altering the participants' attitudes and help-seeking behaviors towards

mental health. Since the mental health awareness campaigns on social media aim to raise awareness about mental health and decrease stigma associated with the topic, this construct will measure the efficacy of the campaign. The study will also examine the predictor variable of upbringing (third culture kid or grew up in the US). Along with this, the predictor variables of race and levels of individual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be measured. The upbringing variable will be key in identifying the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns on social media in third culture kids, and this population will be compared to the US-raised population to do so. This study will explore the following three hypotheses. The first hypotheses will serve as the crux of the study.

H1: Mental health awareness campaigns on social media will be more effective in reducing stigma in people who identify with a singular culture than in third culture kids. This hypothesis will examine the between-participant effects of the campaigns and measure the differences in impact between the populations. The second hypothesis will examine the within-participant differences in the scores of the level of mental health stigma right after viewing the mental health awareness campaign and two weeks after viewing the mental health awareness campaign.

H2: Mental health awareness campaigns on social media will be more effective two weeks after viewing the mental health awareness campaign than immediately after viewing the mental health awareness campaign – with levels of mental health stigma being lower for those heavily impacted by COVID-19. This hypothesis will serve to explore whether these awareness campaigns can implement some level of lasting change. It will examine the potential long-term effects of mental health awareness campaigns on social media, filling a gap in the existing literature. This hypothesis will

also take into consideration the decline in the mental health and wellbeing of individuals across the world due to COVID-19, as more people would have been negatively impacted by the pandemic (Zacher & Rudolph, 2021). The third hypothesis will draw evidence from social media algorithm theories to examine the between-participant differences in the levels of mental health stigma two weeks after viewing the mental health awareness campaign based on the race of the participant.

H3: Mental health awareness campaigns on social media are more effective in reducing stigma in people who identify as White than in people who identify as a Person of Color.

These three hypotheses will contribute to the overall understanding of the impacts of mental health awareness campaigns on social media in the third culture kid population.

## **Proposed Method**

### **Participants**

This study will spotlight the population of third culture kids, who have spent their formative developmental years in regions that differ from their citizenship – thus identifying with more than one cultural background. Because many third culture kids go to internationally oriented schools, they are often fluent in English and tend to pursue higher education at English-oriented institutions. The study thus aims to capture this population as accurately as possible by sampling from third culture kid students who go to colleges and universities in the United States. As a comparison group, the study will also survey domestic students going to colleges and universities in the United States. This sample will consist of students who have grown up immersed in a singular environment and thus identify with a single culture and location – differentiating them from the multicultural third culture kid population. They will also have the same higher education background as the third culture kid sample, ensuring that the key



difference between these two samples is their upbringings in a singular environment or multiple cultures. Because these samples will be convenience samples, they come with the limitation that they may not be representative of all third culture kids or American students. The estimated age range of these participants will be 18-22, but this range will not fully reflect all individuals who are a part of these populations.

The study will need to recruit approximately 563 participants. As previously mentioned, there is a lack of studies that look at the third culture kid population, and many of the existing studies that portray this population are qualitative studies that aim to simply gain further insight into its characteristics and qualities. To account for this lack of quantitative studies, this proposed study will assume a small effect size. The study will account for a total of 481 participants with an  $\alpha$  level of 0.05 and desired power of 0.8 (Cohen, 1992). Because this study includes an initial survey and a follow-up survey, the target sample size must factor in potential attrition and drop-out rates. A survey of major longitudinal studies in the United States reported an average attrition rate of 17% (Capaldi & Patterson, 1987). Although this study will not have the duration of typical longitudinal studies, it will be beneficial to be conservative when considering attrition rates of college students, especially around the sensitive topic of mental health. Therefore, this drop-out rate will be applied to this study to reflect estimated attrition – adding to a target of 563 participants for the study.

The recruitment process will take place mainly through social media, as this study will take place online. The study will be shared through the social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. To reach the target sample, online college and university networks on the social media sites will be utilized, such as general institution-specific student groups on Facebook or institution-specific update pages on Instagram. The study will also lean

on networks for international students studying in colleges and universities in the United States, such as international student groups or international student affinity group pages on Facebook and Instagram, as its audiences are more likely to identify as third culture kids than the more general college and university social media networks. The study will also utilize networks that third culture kids often frequent, including third culture kid resource websites online, third culture kid education and awareness accounts on social media, and the United World Colleges network. This information will also be disseminated through other networks that could include third culture kids within their reach, such as diplomat family support groups or expat family resource groups on social media. The participants will also be asked to share the study with people they know who also identify as third culture kids, so that there is potential for word-of-mouth and snowball recruitment.

The participants will be compensated with a \$5 Visa gift card. This payment method is the most internationally applicable, ensuring that all participants will be able to utilize the gift card. The participants will be compensated for each portion of the study – the initial survey and the follow-up survey – adding to a total compensation of \$10. This amount will be appropriate for participants who will put time into completing the two-part survey but will not be coercive to participants.

## **Materials**

### ***Stigma toward Mental Health Issues***

To assess participants' level of stigma toward mental health issues, the study will utilize the Mental Health Literacy Scale by O'Connor & Casey (2015). The scale includes 35 univariate items in total, but select questions will be administered at certain portions of the study. This will ensure that the participants will not be answering the same questions at each portion of the

survey. The scale broadly measures participants' knowledge on the various aspects of mental health. They will be asked about their recognition of mental health disorders, knowledge of how to seek mental health information, knowledge of risk factors and causes, knowledge of self-treatments, knowledge of professional help available, and attitudes that promote recognition and appropriate help-seeking (O'Connor & Casey, 2015). Some questions include "to what extent do you think it would be helpful for someone to avoid all activities or situations that made them feel anxious if they were having difficulties managing their emotions" and "a mental illness is not a real medical illness." Here, participants will indicate the extent that they agree with the statement. The questions that will measure participants' recognition of mental health disorders and knowledge of risk factors and causes, as well as the questions that will measure the knowledge of professional help available, will be measured on the categorical scale of *very unlikely*, *unlikely*, *likely*, and *very likely*. The questions that measure knowledge of self-treatments will be measured on the categorical scale of *very unhelpful*, *unhelpful*, *helpful*, and *very helpful*. Finally, the questions that measure attitudes that promote recognition and appropriate help-seeking will be measured on the categorical scale of *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neither agree or disagree*, *agree*, and *strongly agree* or *definitely unwilling*, *probably unwilling*, *neither unwilling or willing*, *probably willing*, and *definitely willing*.

These individual questions are categorical measures, but overall, this measurement is continuous. These questions will be compiled and scored into a numerical sum ranging from 35 to 160. To calculate this sum, the questions with a "4" point scale will be scored from "1" (*very unlikely/unhelpful*) to "4" (*very likely/helpful*); the questions with a "5" point scale will be scored from "1" (*strongly disagree/definitely unwilling*) to "5" (*strongly disagree/definitely willing*). A lower score number will indicate high levels of mental health stigma, and a higher score number

will indicate lower levels of mental health stigma. The questions 10, 12, 15, and 20-28 will be reverse-scored – and these numbers will be tallied to compute an individual overall score, making this measure continuous.

The scale's psychometrics were assessed by O'Connor & Casey (2015), and their findings upheld the reliability and validity of the scale. The component of test-retest reliability was solidified through administering the scale to community and mental health professional samples, and the construct validity of the scale was demonstrated through the positive correlation of this questionnaire with the established General Help-Seeking Questionnaire by Wilson et al., (2005). The researchers could not assess criterion validity because there was no gold-standard scale-measurement for mental health literacy at the time of their research, and cross-cultural validity and responsiveness were assessed in a later study. Therefore, this scale is an effective way to measure participants' attitudes and perceptions towards mental health.

This scale will be an explicit measure, meaning that the participants may be able to guess the hypotheses of the study. However, because it will be clear in the consent form that the participants' privacy will be as protected as possible and their answers will not be associated with their contact information, there will be no social desirability concerns – ensuring that the data is not influenced. The scale measuring levels of mental health stigma will be the same throughout the study. To combat the testing effects of using the same survey, there will be six groups of questions that include one or two questions from each category of the scale. Each portion of the questionnaire will be assigned two groups of questions, and these groups will be randomly assigned to individuals to ensure that this utilization of the same scale throughout the study will not affect the results.

### ***Mental Health Awareness Campaigns on Social Media***

The participants will view mental health awareness campaigns that were commissioned by the social media corporation Instagram. The participants will view two media artifacts, one from the *#HereForYou* campaign and another from the *#RealConvo* campaign. The participants will be exposed to one photo artifact from *#HereForYou* (Instagram, 2017) and one video artifact from *#RealConvo* (AFSP, 2019b). These campaigns are publicly accessible, but due to the abundance and nature of constant content generation on social media, are no longer prominent on the social media site.

The first object will be a photo of a mental health and wellbeing influencer that was posted to the social media site's corporate page on the platform from the 2017 campaign (Figure 4). The second object will be a video featuring 10 influencers from various racial backgrounds discussing their experiences with mental health issues and their rationale for joining this 2019 campaign (Figure 5).

### Figure 5

#### *A Video on the AFSP Instagram Account for #RealConvo*



The video is approximately one minute, and participants will be able to both view the clip and read its caption, which explains the campaign and its goals. These two campaign artifacts will be

incorporated into the initial survey, and the participants' changes in their levels of stigma towards mental health issues will be examined.

### ***Effects of COVID-19***

The impact of COVID-19 on each participant will be measured through the COVID-19 Pandemic Experiences Questionnaire, developed by Khoury et al. (2021). Although its direct validity has not been fully assessed, as the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively recent global event, the questions of this questionnaire were based on King et al.'s (2012, as cited in Khoury et al., 2014) prior work on the impact of natural disasters on families. As the nature of the pandemic was uncontrollable much like natural disasters, this scale will effectively measure the effects of COVID-19 on individuals. Through this 10-part scale – which includes questions such as “someone close to me is in danger of catching COVID-19” – the participants will use a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a lot*) to answer how the pandemic impacted their lives on the dimensions of social isolation, risk of COVID-19, financial difficulties, and relationship difficulties (Khoury et al., 2021). The final score will be the sum of the responses and will range from 10, which would mean not impacted by COVID-19, to 70, which would mean heavily impacted by COVID-19. These measures will be included within the demographics section to assess if the mentally strenuous pandemic had any impact on participants' perceptions towards mental health.

### ***Demographics***

The participants will be asked to report their upbringing (third culture kid or grew up in the US). To examine if the participant is a third culture kid, the participants will be asked about their upbringing, and will have a dropdown choice of third culture kid, grew up in the US, or other. The definition of third culture kids will be provided in this section. I anticipate that some participants will identify with as neither a third culture kid or as having grown up in the US

category and will choose the other option. In this case, their responses will most likely be excluded from the data analysis, but they will still be compensated for their time.

The participants will also be asked to report their age, gender, race, and previous experiences with mental health issues. The age question will be open-ended, and the gender question will have the options of man, woman, non-binary, and other, where participants can specify in the other dropdown selection. The categories of race will be aligned with the National Institute of Health's (2015) ethnic and racial categorizations: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, and Two or More Races. The participants will be asked about their previous experiences with mental health issues but elaborating on this may unnecessarily diminish the privacy levels of the study. Therefore, the participants will be provided with the options of: I have had personal experiences with mental health issues; somebody close to me has had experiences with mental health issues; and I do not have experience surrounding mental health issues. When analyzing the results, the responses will be recoded, with "1" being for I have had personal experiences with mental health issues, "2" being for somebody close to me has had experiences with mental health issues, and "3" being for I do not have experience surrounding mental health issues.

## **Procedure**

The two-part quasi-experimental study will take place fully online via Qualtrics and will be disseminated mainly through social media. The Qualtrics survey will first include an informed consent form. Upon providing informed consent, the participants will first complete the mental health stigma measure. After completing the first set of questions, they will be given time to view each social media post from the mental health awareness campaigns. They will be able to

view and read the captions for the photo post, and after 30 seconds they will be provided with the option to move to the next post. After this period, the participants will be able to choose when to move on to the next media object. The participants will be provided with a video post with captions, where they will have the option to move on to the next post after the video plays once. The participants will again be able to choose when they move on to the second set of questions. This viewing of mental health awareness content from social media will be similar to a computer task, as the participants will view and internally evaluate the content they are exposed to. After the screening of the two campaigns, participants will again complete the mental health stigma measures.

Finally, after mental health stigma is assessed, the participants will answer multiple randomized demographic questions. They will report their upbringing and the effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on their life. They will also be asked about their age, gender, race, and previous experiences with mental health issues. After completing this demographics section, participants will be redirected to another password protected Qualtrics survey. This survey will ask for the participants' personal contact information to distribute the first \$5 Visa gift card. This survey will explain how the second Qualtrics survey aims to uphold participant anonymity, and after accepting these conditions, the participants will be finished with the first portion of the study.

Two weeks after completing the initial survey, the participants will be contacted with a Qualtrics link to complete the follow-up survey. This will be similar to the initial survey, but the participants will not be asked to view the mental health awareness campaigns again. There will also be one added question, which will ask for any experiences the participants had that were adjacent to the topic of mental health in the past two weeks. The participants will then be provided with a debriefing section that includes multiple baby animal videos to reset the possible



discomfort that arises from discussing mental health issues. Finally, the participants will again be redirected to a separate Qualtrics survey, in which they will complete the new Qualtrics survey for compensation. This will conclude the two surveys.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The population of interest in this study, – third culture kids – is not a protected or vulnerable population. However, the third culture kid experience can vastly differ and heavily depend on personal timelines and trajectories. This means that each participant will bring unique backgrounds and experiences, which must be a point of consideration throughout the whole study. To achieve this, the language used in the self-report survey will be open-ended and non-restrictive. The level of risk to the participants in this proposed study will be minimal risk. Although the study will include exposure to content surrounding a sensitive topic, the participants will not be asked to disclose their sensitive and personal experiences with mental health issues. They will not be asked to comment on their familiarity, knowledge, and stigma levels towards mental health issues open-endedly beyond the fixed-format survey. In order to protect participants from the discomfort that may arise from discussing this sensitive topic, the study will include animal media objects at the end of the study to console the participants. This will ensure their mood, privacy, and anonymity are not risked. These campaigns were created by corporations to be exposed to users in everyday life. Viewing this campaign will thus present minimal risk to the participants, since it was purposefully created to be posted onto social media. To further minimize potential risks for participants, the study will involve an informed consent process, debriefing process, and post-study animal media content that will aim to lift the participants' moods. These considerations will work to protect the wellbeing of the participants to the furthest extent possible.

To further sustain that ethicality of this study, the participants will be compensated but participation will remain truly voluntary. The participants will have the freedom to drop out of the study at any point of the surveys, and they will explicitly consent to participating in this study. This study will not involve their deception, as the media objects will explicitly be about the topic of mental health awareness. The utilized scale will also explicitly mention mental health issues, which will further inform participants about the topic of this study. Furthermore, the data collected through the survey process will remain anonymous throughout the whole study. Although the survey will collect identifiable information, such as contact information to reach out to participants for the follow-up survey, this identifiable information will be detached from the survey responses to uphold anonymity. The survey will also not be collecting IP addresses, further ensuring maximum privacy for the participants.

The study presents benefits that would further contribute to the psychological understanding of the third culture kid experience, especially when mediated by digitality. The existing psychological literature about third culture kids suggests that the instability of their environments during their developmental years presents an increased possibility for encountering stressful situations, thus putting this population at a higher risk of mental health issues. Despite this, stigma towards mental health could prevent third culture kids who are suffering from seeking help. Participating in this study would be beneficial to these third culture kids, as they will be exposed to mental health awareness campaigns that could present an opportunity for introspection about their own mental health and wellbeing. As previously noted, there is a lack of scholarly knowledge about the third culture kid population. Examining the mental health and wellbeing of third culture kids may contribute to the scholarly knowledge base about this understudied population. There is also a societal benefit to further understanding third culture

kids, who are a globally growing population. Further researching third culture kids, especially when this experience is intertwined with digitality, will be crucial in understanding the psychological impacts of this experience.

These scholarly and societal benefits of the study outweigh the potential risks it presents to the participants. These components suggest that this proposed study is ethical and can balance increasing the knowledge base on third culture kids against the wellbeing of the participants.

### **Anticipated Results**

To test the hypotheses, the study will utilize a repeated measures regression analysis. The statistical analyses will employ the dichotomous variable of upbringing, the categorical variable of previous experience with mental health issues, and the continuous variable of the level of effect of COVID-19. When conducting the statistical analyses, the race variable will be recoded into White and People of Color. The different groups within the People of Color category will also be compared to see if there are any significant differences.

The data will affirm the hypothesis that mental health awareness campaigns on social media are more effective in reducing stigma in people who identify with a singular culture than in third culture kids. This hypothesis is consistent with existing research on persuasion, differences in perceptions of mental health, and third culture kids – suggesting that this awareness campaign will not cater to third culture kids' unique mental health education needs. Therefore, the efficacy of the mental health awareness campaign in reducing mental health stigma levels in third culture kids will not be proven.

The data will also affirm the hypothesis that mental health awareness campaigns on social media are more effective two weeks after viewing the mental health awareness campaign than immediately after viewing the mental health awareness campaign. If the mental health

awareness campaign serves its purpose of positively altering attitudes towards mental health, it will encourage audiences to take actionable steps towards better understanding mental health issues. Therefore, the effects of the campaign will be more prominent after two weeks. When testing this hypotheses, the analysis will also control for the moderating effect of COVID-19 on these differences, with levels of mental health stigma being lower for those who are heavily impacted by the pandemic. Those with higher levels of COVID-19 stress will be more likely to have prior knowledge about mental health issues, impacting the effects of the awareness campaign. This hypothesis will thus illuminate if the mental health awareness campaign is truly impactful in its audiences.

The data will affirm the final hypothesis that mental health awareness campaigns on social media are more effective in reducing stigma in people who identify as White than in people who identify as People of Color. This aligns with digital media theories that social media and its algorithms reflect discriminatory and oppressive ideologies of the individuals and corporations designing them – further accelerating profit. The racist and sexist nature of social media and its algorithm suggest that mental health awareness campaigns in social media will be biased towards majority ideologies, thus making these campaigns more effective in people who identify as White over People of Color.

## **Conclusion**

### **Scholarly Merits and Broader Impacts**

This study aims to add to the literature on the third culture kid population, which is currently inadequate. Because of existing persuasive tactics, minority groups are often not included in the target audience bracket of the culturally and regionally targeted campaigns. As a multicultural population, third culture kids will always identify with a culture that is not of a

majority in their location (Tan et al., 2021). This may manifest differently based on the locations where the third culture kid is living, as each location has a different majority population. The amount of time a third culture kid has spent outside their country of origin significantly impacts the identity development of third culture kids, meaning that periods where the third culture kid is not part of the majority culture can affect their identity development (Cockburn, 2002). Despite not being a homogenous population, third culture kids thus exist within the space of minority identity groups, along with People of Color, because their minority identity status is solidified through their identification with multiple cultures. Therefore, as a population, third culture kids are never a majority and priority target for these campaigns because of their globally expansive yet locally sparse nature. Many existing psychological studies targeting this population have been qualitative in nature, in order to gain a holistic understanding of this population and their shared experiences. By contributing quantitatively to this topic, this study will encourage more psychological studies to be conducted on this understudied yet growing population.

This population is prone to negative psychological impacts due to identity development complications, because of their constant relocation results in difficulties in creating long-lasting relationships or locating community support. As the world becomes more globally interconnected and cross-border movement becomes less restricted, the third culture kid population will only continue to grow. By affirming and acknowledging their experiences, especially in intersection with how media can mediate and impact this experience, the study can contribute to third culture kids' feelings of being understood and heard in broader society. This study will also highlight the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns and its adherence to the oppressive capitalistic systems that underlie social media systems. Analyzing the efficacy of mental health awareness campaigns on social media will allow for further

considerations of its commissions and usage – and its potential to improve the wellbeing of its audience. It will also illuminate the extent the discriminatory nature of the algorithm affects its content. This will also allow for consideration of how to leverage social media’s addictive nature to disseminate social good. Further research into the third culture kid population, and the mental health struggles that they are prone to, will be crucial in understanding the psychological impacts of living nomadically across the globe during one’s developmental years.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic and its negative impacts on wellbeing have increased the visibility of mental health issues. This paper evaluates the usage of mental health awareness campaigns on social media to further propel mental health awareness. On the social media platform Instagram, these awareness campaigns are created, circulated, and disseminated through the capitalistic cycles that dictate social media and its algorithm. The influencers who are utilized in the campaigns represent the individualistic concept of self-branding on social media, contributing to the further commodification of the social media industry. They act as integral parts of the awareness campaign, further educating the algorithm by uploading content that conforms to the aesthetics and cultures surrounding the niche of mental health awareness – allowing the algorithm to selectively disseminate this content and information. The algorithm is not neutral and instead acts upon a biased profit agenda, leaving devastating impacts on those who are already marginalized by racism and sexism. Similar to the oppressive institutional systems of the physical world, these social media corporations willfully neglect these problematic aspects of the algorithm, fostering user addiction and dependency on social media to further this profit imperative. The population of third culture kids are especially vulnerable to the algorithm’s oppressive methods, since they are heavily dependent on social media to maintain

their social circles across the globe. As seen in this population, social media is now fundamental to modern society – raising questions about how to resolve the discrepancy between its positive communicative potential and its negative maladaptive discriminatory structure.

These awareness campaigns on social media consist of persuasive appeals that aim to positively modify audiences' attitudes towards the public health cause of mental health. However, many of these campaigns are regionally and culturally targeted to enhance efficacy. This structure often excludes third culture kids from the target audience of mental health awareness campaigns, as this globally sparse population identifies with more than one culture due to frequent relocation across countries and regions. This fundamentally nomadic aspect of the third culture kid experience, and the turbulence it presents in adjustment and ethnic identity development, makes this population vulnerable to psychological distress. The psychological study in this paper will examine the effectiveness of mental health awareness campaigns on social media, which presents the potential to globally appeal to third culture kids in reducing mental health stigma. This study will present insight and understanding into both the psychological implications of social media campaigns and a nomadic lifestyle that can cause developmental instability.

The survey data and its subsequent repeated measures regression analysis is projected to affirm the hypotheses presented in this paper – which in turn will affirm the campaigns' efficacy, but also highlight the systemic problems of a discriminatory social media structure. This will highlight the need to cater mental health awareness campaigns on social media towards the third culture kid population and their mental health needs, as well as illuminate the discrepancy in promoting mental health awareness on a platform that exploits dependency for profit. To attend to these systemic problems of social media, which encourages and leverages user dependency

through the addictive algorithm and its capitalistic cycles of branding and influence, we must educate these users about the fundamentally discriminatory and oppressive nature of social media. By emphasizing the biased structure of social media, and the insertion of capitalism on its potential to connect and communicate, we can find a space where the connective capabilities of social media can be maximized – impacting the vulnerable population of third culture kids.



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