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Self-Care As Resistance: Navigating Burnout Culture

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Letter from the Editors

Spring 2026, UJCIM

We are delighted to share a new volume of the *Undergraduate Journal of Contemporary Issues & Media*. This edition represents creative and scholarly work from undergraduate student writers across the U.S. and Canada, all engaging with questions related to burnout culture and self-care. In a fast-moving world with high expectations and high stress, considering ways to resist or opt out of burnout culture can feel overwhelming in itself. Yet the stakes of not caring for ourselves—and each other—are increasingly high. The student work represented in this volume shows a variety of perspectives on resisting and rejecting burnout, engaging with popular culture analysis, personal experience, the art of deliberately slowing down, and more. We honor the work of these student authors. The final versions of their work you see in this journal represents persistent efforts to reflect and improve and grow as writers, scholars, and creators.

Additionally, we want to acknowledge with deep gratitude the incredible efforts of our undergraduate editorial assistants

at the University of Utah. Over a one-year, two-course sequence covering editing and publishing, 23 highly engaged, empathetic student editors worked to help authors develop their work and prepare it for publication. The community of student editors and publication designers strengthened not only the work of the authors in this journal, but also of each other as peers. Their careful collaboration made the classroom experience a joy to be part of.

While we don't imagine that this volume will solve all the challenges posed by contemporary burnout culture, we are heartened by the ways that this caring community of writers and editors came together in support of each other's work. Community care is an integral aspect of self-care—and an aspect that our student writers and editors engaged in together. These are the results of their compassionate and collaborative labor.



Rachel Bryson



Maureen Mathison

Life's Aesthetic Experience as a Solution to Burnout

Ada Marre | University of Utah

Introduction

I decided to take some time off from school after my freshman year at the University of Utah. I had spent four years of high school firing on all cylinders to ensure a 4.0 GPA, obtain concurrent enrollment and AP credits, stay involved in extra-curriculars, compete in sports, and stay connected to friends and family. After receiving a scholarship, I felt it had all paid off, and I could rest easy knowing that my hard work had helped me in the next step of life.

But I spent freshman year strung out with high levels of stress at all times. I was still juggling competitive sports, classes, and now a job. I had mostly phased out any social life I had before. I was unhappy with my major, but I felt I couldn't change it for the sake of future job security. I receded into myself, lonely and quiet. I started sleeping more as exhaustion consumed me. I lost weight and interest in doing almost anything other than schoolwork and watching TV in bed. I felt incapable of handling anything, overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy.

So, I took some time off from school. Compared to the stresses of my freshman year, which included the unexpected loss of my beloved grandmother, my gap year felt like a great exhalation. I felt unmoored in a life once tethered by school and routine. I felt as if I were waking up from a deep, hazy dream. My days were dictated not by assignments or class times but by small shifts at a quiet job, coffee dates with friends,

helping my mom out around the house, drives down to a local watering hole, and reading outside on sunny afternoons.

One day, as I walked to work, I pulled off the headphones I wore every day and looked around me. I felt the slightest chill on the tip of my nose. I saw down the street a large tree swaying in the wind, its yellowed leaves falling slowly to the ground. I inhaled, and the air smelled different, a maturing freshness to it. I felt a rush of excitement. It was late September of my gap year, and the back-to-school season washed over me differently this time; it was the whole world changing, rebirthing. Little to do with classes, grades, or deadlines.

I uncomfortably realized that this full-body sensation of the season's change had routinely escaped me, overshadowed by an impending workload. Summer to fall had always marked classes as back in session. Fall to winter was the rush to finish assignments before the end of the first semester. Winter to spring was the beginning of exam season, and spring to summer was finals and the end of a school year. My nose was always too buried in textbooks to be lightly pinched by the cold finger of autumn's chill, and my eyes were too affixed to the board in class to gaze out any windows at the falling leaves. The natural world felt foreign. My body felt foreign to me. I was now aware of the way it breathed in the new autumnal air, carried itself down a hill, and moved through the world without passivity.

A knot twisted in my stomach as I kept walking, my headphones in my hands, all my attention on the world around me. I felt robbed of at least twenty years of changing seasons and vowed never to lose another. What I had lacked during my school years was not only free time and space to think, but aesthetic experiences, and the attitude necessary for having them.

Burnout

Burnout: a feeling familiar to most of the population. The term was coined in the 1970s and used by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger to describe the emotional exhaustion of individuals in high-stress caregiving positions, such as doctors, nurses, and soldiers. Today, the term can be appropriately applied to almost anyone.

The Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care describes workplace burnout as feeling constantly overworked, being under constant time pressure, experiencing conflicts with colleagues, and having extreme commitment that results in people neglecting their own needs (National Library of Medicine, 2024). While these causes of burnout were developed in the context of the workplace, they now pertain to everyday life. Our current societal and economic model paired with the invasive force of social media make these feelings difficult to escape. In addition to being overworked in the career space, spending any amount of time on any social media platform can also make people feel strung out, tired, and hopeless. Many individuals are personally attacked online based on their beliefs, opinions, or identities. The warped perspective of social media can make the world seem like a place full of conflict, disagreement, and anger. While people may engage in less face-to-face confrontation these days, the sheer amount of unrest present on the

internet is enough to make anyone feel burnt out.

Information overload also contributes a large amount of exhaustion to our lives. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han in his book *The Burnout Society* suggests that “[burnout] is due to an inability to resist stimulus. ...Reacting immediately, yielding to every impulse, already amounts to illness and represents a symptom of exhaustion” (Han, 2015). The average American spends 7 hours and 11 minutes looking at a screen every day, and it is estimated that across all platforms, they take in about 11.8 hours of new information (Wonder, 2022). When much of this information is politicized, of course, the individual is inclined to care, react, and yield to all that comes their way.

Many individuals, especially students, feel overworked and must operate under constant time constraints in academia and in online spaces. The pressure of assignment deadlines and work/school/life balance places a large burden on young people’s lives. Some may sacrifice sleep, socializing, self-care, or nutrition in order to perform highly in class or the workplace (Student Affairs Information & Research Office, 2020). On top of that, many may experience feelings of under accomplishment due to expectations about achievements at a given time in one’s life. With the click of a button, anyone can see examples of their peers achieving things and being “far ahead” in life, without any of the context of what allows them to achieve it. Whether in the workplace, at school, or absorbing information, our brains are simply tired.

It should not be ignored that many stressors mentioned previously are not isolated within the pursuit of a career or education. Our current economic state creates undue pressures that are independent of these other factors. Hunger, food insecurity, housing inequality, and credit

debt are debilitating issues for many Americans, particularly children and families (Konish, 2024). It’s easy to see how these issues of financial instability would lead individuals to burnout. And though that is no less important, it makes the prevalence of burnout occurring in individuals in the middle and upper classes harder to explain. Surely, once the problems of food insecurity and living wages are solved, a person might be at rest?

Achievement Society

While trying to get to the crux of burnout culture, Han attributes the cause of widespread depression and burnout to our current “achievement society.” As technology, opportunity, and access to information have increased, so has the individual need for differentiation, expression, and achievement. “In periods of abundance, rejection and expulsion are the chief concerns...the paradigm of disciplin[e] is replaced by the paradigm of achievement, or, in other words, by the positive scheme of *Can*” (Han, 2015, emphasis original). Achievement society doesn’t necessarily lack oppressive forces like poverty, persecution, and inequality, but on a far more widespread level is dictated by the individual’s need to produce and achieve in order to feel of worth or individual in a world of homogenization and globalization.

What exactly makes this society so exhaustive? Personal achievement has become more possible through technology and connection; constraints have been reduced. Surely the idea that one can achieve anything, be the maker of one’s own success, and rise to the top would inspire us and not result in societal burnout. But rather than having a comprehensive understanding of the limits of one’s abilities and access, the individual is instead overwhelmed with the constant reminder that they *could* and *should* be doing more. This does not actual-

ly provide freedom to the individual but instead creates a perception of freedom while inspiring “*auto-aggression in the self*” and “the *free constraint* of maximizing achievement” (Han, 2015, emphasis original).

This apparent freedom makes work and life seem more freeing, but, in actuality, a fulfilling existence becomes impossible. “It is not the imperative only to belong to oneself, but the *pressure to achieve* that causes exhaustive depression” (Han, 2015, emphasis original). Society ties the value of the self to achievement, creating a constant need for approval that can never be fulfilled. That hopelessness and impossibility breeds exhaustion, anxiousness, and depression. Han also states that achievement is “the new *commandment* of late-modern labor society.” We are conditioned to work ourselves to death, to never be satisfied with our work, and as a result, to never be satisfied with ourselves.

It is important here to acknowledge that this is not necessarily an accurate assessment of all of society. These definitions are helpful but do not apply to individuals who are oppressed, marginalized, or living in poverty. That doesn’t negate the fact that the struggles of achievement society exist and impact many. Philosopher and author Victor Ferraro says it best in his paper responding to Han’s book, saying “We have a split society. The majority community appears to have embraced the society of achievement while the minorities are still reeling under disciplinary power and are far from society of achievement enjoyed by the majority” (Ferraro, 2023). Many suffer from a lack of opportunity and autonomy and are still exposed to the social pressures of the achievement society, taking the brunt of both.

I acknowledge that this model and the language I use going forward

do not apply to all, and especially not those in marginalized groups. However, I feel that the widespread burnout experienced by a substantial amount of the population is still worth discussing, and solutions are possible and useful.

Attitudes

So, what is to be done? This self-destructive mentality seems to be reinforced on a structural level. A proposal to upheave every aspect of our modern world, which creates this achievement society, would perhaps feel justified, but unhelpful to the individual. More accessible, practical, and personal solutions would be much more applicable and appropriate.

The 20th-century American philosopher Jerome Stolnitz, in his 1978 article “The aesthetic attitude in the rise of modern aesthetics,” developed the concept of the “aesthetic attitude” and the “practical attitude,” two attitudes that Stolnitz says “determine...how we perceive the world” (Stolnitz, 1978). The practical attitude is the worldview we adopt when concerned with the function and ability of things. Stolnitz believes it is our status quo perception of the world, saying, “We usually see things in our world in terms of their usefulness for promoting or hindering our purposes. ... What can I do with it, and what can it do to me? ...I do not concentrate my attention upon the object itself. Rather, it is of concern to me only so far as it can help me to achieve some future goal” (Stolnitz, 1978).

This, to me, feels deeply connected to the exhaustive aspects of our achievement society. Both are concerned with value and relate to issues that arise when our value is placed in our merits rather than our existence. “[W]hen our attitude is ‘practical’ we perceive things only as means to some goal which lies beyond the experience of perceiving

them” (Stolnitz, 1978). It can also inspire a warped sense of self-worth and a lack of empathy. If we regard ourselves and other beings only as means to an end, we risk self-worthlessness and the devaluation of life.

The aesthetic attitude, on the other hand, is the active perception of the world in the context of its aesthetics as opposed to “purpose” or “function.” Aesthetics themselves are defined as “a kind of object, a kind of judgment, a kind of attitude, a kind of experience, and a kind of value” (Shelley, 2022). With that definition, we can better understand what Stolnitz means. Under the aesthetic attitude, “things are not to be classified, or studied, or judged. They are in themselves pleasant or exciting to look at” (Stolnitz, 1978). Value is found in inherent aesthetic properties rather than external utility.

The aesthetic attitude is also described as a state of “disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone.” This idea of being “disinterested” can be misconstrued as “uninterested.” Stolnitz, however, makes the distinction that aesthetic experiences, such as reading a novel or watching a film or even studying the winding patterns of bark on trees, can have us riveted, completely absorbed for hours on end. The disinterested aspect describes a disinterest in achievement and practical application. Stolnitz also rejects the notion that the aesthetic attitude is any less engaged than the practical one. “In taking the aesthetic attitude, we want to make the value of the object come fully alive in our experience. ...Therefore, we focus our attention upon the object and “key up” our capacities of imagination and emotion to respond to it.”

We even have physical reactions to aesthetic experiences. Chills from the belted notes of a musical

performer, breath held during an intense scene of a movie, our foot tapping to the deep beat of a bass drum. We engage with empathy, our ability to connect with others, and better understand experiences outside of our own when we employ an aesthetic attitude. All of this is to say that this attitude is not a passive form of perception or experience. As Stolnitz demonstrates, it is the antithesis of the practical attitude. Therefore, adopting this attitude could mitigate the negative impacts of the achievement society.

When viewing the world with an aesthetic attitude, we recognize that human beings have a beauty and a value completely separate from their ability to perform a function. “[F]or its own sake alone,” as Stolnitz says. Things don’t have to be “good” or “productive” or “pleasant” to be experienced through the aesthetic attitude. Watching a poorly made film or inhaling the sulfuric scent of something rotting in the trash may not be widely accepted “pleasant” experiences, but we may approach them through our senses and tastes and experience them as such. Adopting the practical attitude forces us to evaluate ourselves, others, and everything we interact with in our world, based on what they can and cannot do. If we feel inadequate as practical beings, we feel inadequate in our very existence.

The practical attitude and the aesthetic attitude are not reserved for specific experiences. Many of us have become wildly disinterested in books when assigned to read them for classes. The practical attitude forced upon us by teachers often removes the intended aesthetic experience of literature. And while a plane ride might take us from point A to point B as quickly as possible, the experience can become that of the disinterested when we peer out the window, marvel at our bodies suspended in air, feel the chill of the elevation, or clear our throat in an

attempt to pop our ears.

Now, the practical attitude is not to be completely discounted. Stolintz acknowledges this, saying “from the standpoint of fulfilling one’s purposes it would be stupid and wasteful to become absorbed in the object itself.” Some of the most enjoyable things in life marry practicality and aesthetics, blending form, function, and fashion into something beautiful and endlessly handy. And in the case of human problem solving—one of our greatest superpowers, in my opinion—the practical attitude can stand between life and death.

There is much to be done on the structural levels of society, which can relieve the systemic pressures of the world. But as individuals, the simple act of noticing, looking, feeling, sensing, and appreciating the world through the aesthetic attitude can remind us of our value as beings that walk this earth, removing the need to be practical. Instead, we can run our hands through our hair, watch the seasons change, and take a deep breath.

While an aesthetic attitude might not alter society overall, the continual and routine use of it could prove helpful to the individual in reminding them that the highest form of world perception is *not* practicality or achievement. The ability to engage with the world on an aesthetic level means that we could also engage with *ourselves* on an aesthetic level.

If we look to the Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy definition that aesthetics are “a kind of object, a kind of judgment, a kind of attitude, a kind of experience, and a kind of value” (Parsons & Carlson, 2024), we might be able to better identify ways to concretely practice the aesthetic attitude as we work to apply it to more abstract things (like our very existence). While I

may provide practical reasons for doing these things, I’d like to highlight that all of them are aesthetic experiences worth having for their own sake. Participating in these activities is not meant to make you *good* at them. The point is to simply do them and be unconcerned with their practicality.

Nature Approach

So much of the achievement society relies on the idea of isolated individuals being removed from each other and from the larger picture of life. Compulsive achievement is an internal and externally-focused mindset that drives us to ignore the parts of the world that do not aid in the furthering of goals. What, then, is the role of nature in the achievement society? I believe that if we applied the practical attitude to our natural world, we would have little reason to leave any of it untouched. Nature exists just because it does, and humans should value it just because we can. This is an extremely approachable way to practice the aesthetic attitude.

The discipline of “nature aesthetics” examines the aesthetic qualities of environments where non-human forces and elements predominate. It recognizes the “multi-sensory experience” of nature, the way it challenges our perceptions, and “the importance of traditional dichotomies...between subject and object” (Parson & Carlson, 2024). Research shows that being present in nature is a natural mood booster. The simple act of forming a cognitive connection with nature “seems to contribute to happiness even when you’re not physically immersed in nature” (Weir, 2025). Nature aesthetics add to this. “It beckons appreciators to immerse themselves in the natural environment and to reduce to as small a degree as possible the distance between themselves and the natural world” (Parsons & Carlson, 2024). The more connected one feels

to nature, the more one recognizes their place as a part of the natural world, and the happier a person tends to be (Zelenski & Nisbet, 2014)

To connect with and sit in nature is to be reminded that you are a part of it. And nature, outside of human intervention, is not asked to continually strive for production and work until the end of time. The wind blows, the sky is blue, the ocean laps to shore, and all the while we are just as natural as they are. We don’t have to achieve until the end of time, either. I invite you to sit in nature, without any distractions, and indulge in the aesthetic attitude.

Interaction with Art

Under the mental state of compulsive achievement, any artwork that appears not to require much technical skill can easily appear like a waste of time, money, or space. Many people today describe artworks as worthless or “less-than” because they are simplistic or not requiring of great technical skills. But art *is* aesthetics; it requires an aesthetic attitude, and it should not be evaluated in this purely practical context. The point of making art is not always to display one’s technical ability or proficiency in a skill. Even if one is unskilled or unfamiliar with a discipline, art creation is of value as a practice, as it can lead to moments of discovery and be a method of creation for creation’s sake, not for achievement.

While some devalue simplistic creative endeavors or artworks, others reject the idea that there is any need to analyze art or media beyond its surface level. Art is viewed as input/output, a place to extract something specific and clear, rather than a field of ambiguity and exploration. While it may allow for the technically unskilled to explore artistic expression, the aesthetic attitude does not give one a pass to ignore the deeper meanings of a work of art. In fact,

the more one attempts to dissect and understand art, the more aesthetic experiences can be had. Art may contain some profound meaning or be difficult to accomplish, but appreciation and creation are worthy in and of themselves. Again, the ‘disinterested’ state of the attitude merely refers to disinterest as regards to practical purpose, and not to all forms of apathy. The achievement society rejects the idea that meaning could exist for meaning’s sake, while the aesthetic attitude cultivates it.

Art, while a livelihood and source of income for some, is not inherently an achievement-based activity. This is one of the reasons that it can be so difficult to define. It has less strict goals, being both an object and an experience. For this reason, it evades practicality under the achievement society. Some philosophers define art as something that changes you. Maybe finger painting won’t enlighten you to the meaning of life, but if you walk away from the experience with even the slightest feeling of creative expression, then you have been changed. You have done something simply for the sake of doing it rather than for the sake of achievement. Do not be swayed by the idea that art can be a waste of time, even if you are unmoved by a piece. Creation and expression, no matter how small, are worthy.

Embracing Humor

There’s a reason laughter is often described as the best medicine. Both short- and long-term effects of the physical act of laughing can improve our health in various ways. It can stimulate organs, relieve stress, soothe tension, release natural painkillers, improve the immune system, and increase personal life satisfaction (Sandhya, 2023). French Philosopher Henri Bergson discusses the unique and abstract nature of humor in his 1900 book *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic*. Much of

his examination of humor reveals that it is a unique form of human expression that not only changes our perspective (much like the aesthetic attitude) but can help soothe the pain of information overload.

Bergson describes, analogously to Han, what our instincts as humans do to us in the face of constant information. “Life and society require of each of us [a] constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation” (Bergson, 1900/1984). Bergson insists that a requirement of humor is a disinterested state of mind. He suggests that humor exists “within a neutral zone in which man simply exposes himself to man’s curiosity” (Bergson, 1900/1984). He believes that if a person would “step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy” (Bergson, 1900/1984). That’s not to say we should stop caring about everything so that we might laugh a little bit more. But as the constant flow of information threatens to exhaust us, we can use humor as a release of tension.

In this way, Bergson establishes that the comic spirit is much like the aesthetic attitude, and we can see the ways in which it benefits us socially and physiologically. Bergson even says that “there is something esthetic about it, since the comic comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art.” It is a nearly identical description of the aesthetic attitude by Stolintz. Humor is possible when we are unconcerned with achievement. What a beautiful thought, that in the presence of laughter—and in order to inspire it—we must first regard ourselves as works of art. Even if this act is only subconscious, I believe this to be a perfect rejection of the productivity demanded of us. In the face of overworking, compulsive achievement, and feelings of inade-

quacy, we may choose to laugh. So, watch an old comedy, tell jokes with your friends, or read what clever people write online. Laugh not just to ease the pain of burnout, but simply because it is possible.

Games and Play

Games can greatly vary in complexity. Tossing a ball back and forth, a decades-long *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign, leagues of athletic competition, massive multiplayer online servers are all considered games. The diversity of activities inside that single world spans all of humanity across time and land. Similar to laughter, engaging in play or games can lower cortisol levels and combat feelings of stress. It also builds emotional resilience. Children and adults who play more games or engage in play show far more emotional intelligence and elasticity (The Center for Trauma and Embodiment, 2025). Games also provide a safe and boundless space to express creativity and problem-solving in a low-stress environment. Depending on the type of game, one can be exposed to new perspectives. Physical games can be a low-pressure way to get blood pumping to the body and the brain. They can also be excuses (or good reasons, depending on how you see it) to spend time and connect with others. Playing builds bonds and friendship.

Play can be structured or unstructured, taking the form of games or more loose activities like crafting and puzzles. The purpose of playing a game is not to be good or gain some skill that will help you be more productive. The purpose is to have an experience that you otherwise could not have if you were not playing a game. Doing so will engage your aesthetic sensibilities and help you approach life with an aesthetic attitude.

The aesthetic attitude is required for play, and the two share core

similarities. The National Institute for Play is an organization dedicated to furthering education and research about play and helping individuals apply play to their daily lives. They recount that “the essence of play lies not in the activity itself but in the personal experience of engagement and satisfaction it brings.” (Diamond, 2025). Anything from joining a community softball league to doodling on the corner of a paper in class becomes play when we choose to engage with it on that level.

“The opposite of play is not work—it’s depression.” (Vaughan & Brown, 2009) Adults and children alike require this continual engagement to stay flexible under pressure, and better access life’s enjoyment. Much like the aesthetic attitude, expanding play into everyday life “can transform many tasks into playful experiences. Playful individuals utilize adaptive coping strategies, such as reframing challenges and finding joy in everyday moments” (Proyer, 2012).

Conclusion

When life stresses you out and the threat of burnout looms, consider the world through the aesthetic attitude. Consider the feeling of your chest moving up and down as you breathe. Consider and sit with the pain and frustration in your heart when something has not gone your way. Tune in to the emotions and sensations of life, both the good and the bad, and let yourself be moved. Think of yourself and the miracle of your existence. Think about how you are more than just a brain controlling a body meant to be slotted into a job to produce until the day you die. You are a human being, evolved from millions of years of life on this planet; your very DNA long predates the nine-to-five. Call a friend, sit on a patch of grass, laugh at yourself, draw on your walls, dance even if you look silly, and re-

ject compulsive achievement. Exist. Play. Live.

I didn’t know on that walk to work a year ago that my mind was slowly adopting the aesthetic attitude, but I felt the change, nonetheless. I’ve worked to incorporate this mindset into my life. I choose to walk even if it means I get somewhere slower, because the natural world has beauty to offer. I let myself take a lighter class load if it means I can slow down and enjoy socializing and hobbies. I don’t view myself as a machine meant to maximize productivity but as a human being that needs safety, self-expression, and love. In the chaos of school, work, and life, I do my best to take a break every now and then, look out the window, and watch the seasons change just because I can.

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Hi, I'm **Ada**! I'm 21, a Libra, and a Writing and Rhetoric Studies major at the University of Utah. I love reading/writing, travel, and comedy. I am often frustrated by the current narratives which often characterize things like art, expression, creativity, and play as activities useful only when they can act in service of other pursuits. To me, they are among life's greatest pursuits. I think that the most wonderful things in life are the things which are interesting and valuable in doing for their own sake. I believe that the world and education in particular should value these parts of the human condition and recognize their vitality. I hope to continue writing and exploring ideas of happiness, relationships, and art as I continue my studies. Thank you for reading. (P.S. Editors are the best!)

Rest and the Battle to Maintain It

Nicole Asselin | *Smith College*

Is my right to choose to rest anyone else's business but my own? Well, of course it is—or so the modern world says. A choice to rest is also an opportunity to be scorned and mocked. Society does not reward rest, nor does it allow time for it. In the Western world, a decision to rest is viewed as a justification for being poor, an act of extreme sloth, and a contentious matter of great shame. My desire to rest, and even prioritize it, is a direct revolt against the capitalist machine of western civilization. Capitalism seeks to use my body up; good till the last drop once I reach retirement age. My value is calculated by the overtime I work, the sick days I do not use, and the speed with which I complete my work. Capitalism does not wish to see me happy, healthy, or fulfilled. That would not be profitable, and only the profit matters in a system of millions of workers. This is why rest is radical, and where one's true life purpose can be found. Resting is a rejection of workforce exploitation and the sense of pride that we are expected to associate with it. It is a choice to invest one's time in oneself and not the pursuit of profit for an employer. This is precisely why choosing rest every day is paramount in one's life.

When asked what the currency of the world is, most would answer by saying money. It is, in fact, time, and the more our time can be monopolized by industry, the more profit can be made. The demand for our time has led to hustle culture becoming prevalent in the United States as our lives revolve around

work and finances. Work becomes glorified through hustle culture, and how could it not? The workforce has become bleak, and the glorification of overworking serves as a coping mechanism. In the United States “national work hours rose 10.7% between Q1 2007 and Q4 2024, reaching 296.7 billion hours” in total for labor (Bannon, 2025). People are forced to work more hours to make ends meet as wages stay stagnant. There are almost 9 million people in the United States working multiple jobs (Castrillon, 2025). Hustle culture gilds this unfortunate reality as people romanticize their exploitation and act like they not only choose it, but benefit from it. It gives a false sense of autonomy in one's overburdened work life. The glimmer of hustle culture fades fast as burnout looms in the background.

I see the early stages of this mindset in academia. Students around me one-up each other as they proudly declare how many nights they have stayed up studying for a test. This experience is not unique to me. Lizzette Spangenberg (2025) commented on the toxicity of overworking culture: “I saw numerous graduates proudly posting on LinkedIn about the all-nighters they had pulled and sleepless nights they had endured as part of their new jobs.” Hustle culture is a coping response to the demands of capitalism. When our time is demanded from us, stolen even by surrounding corporations and systems, a choice to pursue rest becomes a potential loss of capital—for both employee and employer. Rest provides a pause in one's contribu-

tion to a booming and demanding workforce, and that is unacceptable when money is the main prerogative of daily life. We are taught that our own mental and physical wellbeing should come second to our work—to worship at the altar of overtime.

Sleep imposes a great threat on productivity. Companies stand to lose too much money and efficiency by allowing their workers to sleep eight hours. Nagoski & Nagoski (2025) wrote “When you're asleep, you're only helping yourself,” and capitalism sees no use in that. Everyone shares the obsession of beating the need for sleep, even the government. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) has created an Alert Warfighter Enablement (AWARE) program devoted exclusively to keeping soldiers awake and alert (Satam, 2024). The project “aims to safely stimulate brain function to improve alertness for a controlled time period” via the use of “light activation and photo-pharmaceuticals” (DARPA, 2024). The overall goal is to stimulate the brain with drugs that activate in the presence of light. Staving off sleep and rest is a dangerous game to play. People cannot function as tireless machines and if they try, it comes at the cost of health and happiness.

Human beings are not meant to work for great lengths of time without taking a period of rest. A prime example of this is that when people do not stop and have restful sleep, utter havoc is wreaked upon the body. If our bodies do not get the necessary 7-9 hours of sleep required, we accrue a sleep debt. If you miss two hours of sleep, you have just acquired two hours of sleep debt. You might think that snoozing your alarm clock on the weekend is lazy behavior, but that is incorrect. It is your body's attempt to try to repair the effects of sleep deprivation and correct your sleep debt (Newsom 2025). Professor Russel Foster (2023), a sleep researcher at Oxford

University, referenced the effect a lack of sleep has on the body in his book *Life Time*. Foster's disturbing results show that sleep deprivation heightens both anxiety and depression in people (pp. 34-35). Anxiety and depression are both linked to cortisol, the stress hormone of the human body produced by adrenal glands. Long term stress can be disastrous for both the physical health and mental wellbeing of a person, and it has long been referenced as a silent killer. Sustained exposure to stress puts you at risk of both immune system and heart problems (Yaribeygi et al., 2017). Making time for 8 hours of sleep is integral to healthy human functioning. We can try to delay and shorten the duration of our time spent sleeping, but our bodies simply will not allow for it in the long term.

Capitalist systems de-emphasize sleep and prioritize longer workdays. Proof of this can be found in the culture of work in the United States. Stores are open 24 hours. Factories stay open around the clock. One way that people keep up with a workforce that never sleeps is to use stimulants. Caffeine consumption has never been more widespread than it is in today's world. A recent study on U.S. caffeine consumers shows that people who consume caffeine are taking it in higher doses than years prior (Mitchell et al., 2025). Energy drinks push us beyond our caffeine limits, with some brands offering up to 300mg of caffeine, nearly three times the caffeine content of a single cup of coffee. The Mayo Clinic studied the effects of energy drinks on the heart and found that heart health can in some cases be adversely affected (Howland, 2024). Racing hearts and exhausted adrenal glands must pay the price for the demand of our time in the workplace. Societally, we must reject the idea that we are more valuable employees when we work more and instead accept the notion that the wellbeing and health of ourselves and our

society is more important. The first steps in doing this are advocating for a full range of healthcare, encouraging the use of sick days rather than praising perfect attendance, and emphasizing the inherent need for rest that we all have.

It is not just our sleep that is jeopardized, but our general health as well. The United States' lack of proper dental and vision insurance from employers is intentional. Insurance for employees costs the employer hundreds of dollars per month and is not ideal when profit is the main business goal (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). A full set of teeth and healthy eyes are deemed unnecessary for people to function in the workplace, so they become unimportant. This presents an egregious fallacy to anyone who has had to live with blurred vision. Try operating at full capacity while in the throes of a toothache or freshly executed root canal. It can be pure hell. In my poor hometown in Massachusetts, it is not uncommon to see brilliant but rotted smiles on your walk into work. Their teeth had to pay the price that the workforce demands again and again.

A recent CDC study (2024) on oral health found that "57 million Americans live in a dental health professional shortage area" and fewer children are receiving preventative dental care than in years prior. Despite the obvious discomfort that people go through without proper medical, coverage remains elusive to many. This is the status quo in America. Health insurance and all its derivatives end up becoming bragging points in social circles. Insurance coverage signifies security, class, status, and most importantly, the fact that the person can afford to get sick. Access to a full range of health care should be a human right rather than a luxury. The truth is that being even the best and most productive worker is not enough to

warrant concern over one's quality of life.

Choosing to rest is vital. Beyond the obvious point of enjoying the time we take to relax, rest can boost our productivity, health, and creativity. The secret to higher productivity is not tied to an uptick in worked hours and labor yield. It is intrinsically connected to rest. Powering through and continuing to work increases fatigue and detracts from the quality of our work. Our "cognitive performance naturally declines after prolonged focus," as does our emotional state (Sharma, 2025). Cycling between periods of rest and work promises better cognitive function, performance, and mood. Rather than powering through a stint in your work, try carving out periods of relaxation. Take a nature walk, enjoy a powernap, or schedule time for engaging in a hobby that brings you peace. You will find that you return to your task with renewed vigor and creativity. Emily and Amelia Nagoski (2025) referenced this in their book *Burnout* and stated that "Rest makes us more persistent and productive" (p. 158) and highlights how it is a necessity in our daily life. One might even argue that rested workers offer more value to the workforce overall. The forty-hour work week is inevitable for many of us, but we can fight the mental and physical burnout of it effectively by striving to prioritize rest as much as we do work.

Rest takes on many forms. People often think that rest involves being sedentary. They think that healing can only be found in a warm bath or reading a book in bed. Active rest, however, can be just as rejuvenating. Art, dance, and song lift spirits and are also considered active forms of rest. Creativity is an essential part of humanity; it allows for the mind to be unburdened from stress and free to create artistic works that feed the soul. When someone is forced to work tirelessly and without down-

time, life lacks purpose, and a person lacking purpose will find their soul dampened and their creativity snuffed out. We are told that work must hold purpose, and that if we lack purpose, it can be found in our career. This is another fallacy presented by capitalism. Humans need to create. In creation, we find and heal ourselves. It is a remedy for exhaustion and a source of happiness.

In the days of ancient Greece, the symposium reigned supreme. People gathered to eat delicious food, write music, read poetry, and discuss philosophy. People sang in the street. It was as natural as breathing. We have lost this wonder and lust for the arts because we have been fooled into thinking that art is only good if it is worthy of praise or profit. People sing in isolation in their cars for fear of sounding bad. Drawing becomes a waste of time because people see better in museums and compare themselves to it. We submit to the grim desperation of our overworked lives and sit when we should move, scroll when we should write, and read business reports rather than literature. We seek comfort from the very things that deplete us. Work will not bolster us in our dark moments of life, but people, connection, and the arts will.

It is not surprising that our culture's emphasis on work has deemphasized the arts when they have long brought us joy and meaning. Dancing has been proven to be as effective as some antidepressants (Prudente et al., 2024), but people sit at weddings while music plays on. Fear and shame compel them to stay seated. They miss the point of dancing by thinking that it exists for performative value and not as a natural, necessary human practice. Societally, we must channel our passions and create again. There is profound healing in this form of active rest, but we must allow people to see the value in it. This starts with a healthy

balance between work and life. People must be able to use sick and vacation time without guilt. They must have enough time in the day to engage in meaningful hobbies and to pursue rest. As workers, we find ourselves deeply entangled in the exhaustion of our burnout. We cannot, however, allow our daily grind to drain us until weariness is all we know. We must push back and fight for our right to respite and self-fulfillment.

Capitalism praises those who toil endlessly and forgo rest. It claims that this is the recipe for a life of honest living and the secret to feeling fulfilled as a productive member of society. This is a falsehood, elegantly draped in exploitation. There is no respite or peace found in overtime, and there is no benefit to human beings in shunning rest. When one's rest is jeopardized, it comes at the cost of their health and creativity, and what a heartbreaking waste that is. I want you to try, with all of your heart, to live a delicious life. Realize that work does not hold the answers that you are told you should be searching for. I will end this piece by urging you to take that sick day, doodle in the margins, and stake your claim once more in your life. Be unapologetically passionate about rest—especially your own.

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Nicole is a recent graduate of Smith College, where she majored in Biology and minored in Chemistry. She plans to pursue a master's degree in genetic counseling and is intrigued by the intersection of science and human connection that the career offers. In her life prior to obtaining her degree, Nicole worked years laden with overtime and found herself exhausted. This, coupled with a lifetime of watching her family members toil, sparked a desire in her to challenge unhealthy aspects of U.S work culture and encourage others to become passionate about setting work boundaries and pursuing their own self-fulfillment. Nicole finds her own enrichment in reading, writing and losing herself in nature. She hopes the article inspires people to create more art: good, bad, ugly, and everything in between, and to rest without guilt.

The Rhetoric of Self-Care

Natasha Enquist | University of Victoria

In today's burnout culture, self-care has become a questionable concept that is used both as a form of political resistance and as a marketing tool for consumer wellness. This paper analyzes two contrasting representations of self-care: the radical feminist framing theorized by Audre Lorde, and the neoliberal commodification promoted by Gwyneth Paltrow. These figures embody the tension between collective survival and individualized optimization—two narratives that define how self-care is understood today. By exploring this rhetorical disconnect, how contemporary wellness culture often obscures the structural root of burnout is highlighted, reinforcing how privilege and exclusion are masked under the guise of empowerment.

Paltrow uses the ideology of health to position the rhetoric of self-care as a consumer-driven practice that demands personal responsibility, discipline, and continual self-optimization, making it implicitly exclusive. This is significant because it distorts the foundational feminist and political concept of "self-care," originally defined by Lorde as a means of self-preservation and collective care (Kim & Schalk, 2021). Instead, Paltrow depoliticizes the concept by transforming it into an elitist luxury good, stripping it of its radical feminist origins. By conceptualizing self-care as an individualized, aspirational pursuit, accessible primarily to those with financial means, Paltrow shifts its meaning from collective empowerment to consumer indulgence. Her approach demonstrates the broader commod-

ification of health, reinforcing the neoliberal belief that well-being is a personal responsibility to be managed through financial investment rather than through systemic or structural solutions (Metzl, 2021). As a result, self-care is no longer positioned as an act of resistance but as a status symbol marketed to affluent consumers. To examine these competing frameworks, this analysis begins by outlining the ideology of health through Lorde's radical self-care, followed by an exploration of how Paltrow appropriates this concept for profit, transforming it into an elitist marker of personal achievement and consumer indulgence.

While the dominant health ideology promotes wellness as a moral obligation and personal burden, alternative frameworks have long resisted this view. Self-care, as framed by Lorde in *A burst of light and other essays*, is a radical act of survival and resistance. Lorde asserts, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde, 2017, p. 130). As a Black lesbian poet and activist facing terminal cancer, Lorde positioned self-care as a vital means of resistance against systemic oppression—particularly for marginalized communities, including Black people, women, and queer individuals (Kim & Schalk, 2021). In this context, self-care becomes an act of self-preservation in the face of both personal and societal struggles, challenging the dominant cultural narratives of neglect and denial (Kim & Schalk, 2021). Neglect

refers to the structural abandonment of marginalized populations, a world order that renders some lives expendable and others protected (Kim & Schalk, 2021). Denial operates alongside it through ableist and moralizing rhetoric that obscures systemic responsibility, designating deprivation as individual failure while justifying the withholding of care from disabled, poor, racialized, and queer communities (Kim & Schalk, 2021).

In contrast to Lorde's rhetoric of self-preservation, Paltrow reframes self-care as an exclusive, aspirational pursuit, presenting wellness as something achieved through meticulous routines, expensive treatments, and strict personal habits.

In a March 2024 interview with *Harper's Bazaar*, Paltrow presents self-care as an aspirational pursuit, one that requires dedication to unaffordable healthcare measures. She claims, "You have to want to do it and have a curiosity around feeling better," implying wellness is a matter of personal choice and willpower. This perspective overlooks the systemic barriers that prevent most people from accessing such practices. She also states, "If people are trying to pursue wellness because they think it's the thing to do, it's different than really being ready to ask yourself what kind of life you want to lead and how you want to feel." This perspective reinforces the neoliberal belief that wellness is an individual responsibility, ignoring the broader issues of access and privilege that make this version of self-care unattainable for many. By framing self-care as a luxury, Paltrow strips it of its radical roots, as theorized by Lorde, warping it into a status symbol tied to personal wealth rather than a collective act of survival.

By positioning self-care as a moral duty reliant on personal responsibility and financial means, Paltrow's

standards elevate individualism as a health ideal. Such framing deepens social inequalities, especially for marginalized groups facing restricted healthcare access. This ideology aligns with Metzl's argument that health is not merely biological, but an ideological construct shaped by societal forces (2021). Positioned as a moral standard, health becomes a measure of worth, where individuals are judged by their ability to conform to ideals of physical appearance, fitness, and mental resilience. In contrast, those unable due to illness, disability, or economic barriers face stigma (Metzl, 2021). Not only does health become moralized, but also commodified, making well-being a purchasable privilege rather than a universal right.

Contemporary rhetorical framing transforms self-care from a mode of resistance into a symbol of aspirational luxury, upholding market-based values and obscuring systemic obstacles to well-being. Paltrow embodies this shift through her promotion of a hyper-individualistic, tech-driven wellness philosophy, turning self-care into an elite consumer practice. Expensive interventions like genetic methylation testing for optimal detoxification and biometric tracking with devices like the \$469 CAD Oura Ring position wellness as a privilege of the wealthy (March, 2024). Even mindfulness is commodified through paid meditation apps like Moments of Space, reinforcing the link between well-being and financial access. Paltrow's integration of costly healthcare measures, such as annual advanced cancer screenings, weekly sessions in her personal outdoor infrared sauna, intermittent fasting with elaborate smoothies, and private workouts with fitness coach Tracy Anderson, further illustrates how her version of self-care is curated for affluence. By transforming everyday habits into purchasable luxuries, she depoliticizes self-care,

turning it into a consumerist spectacle. Her rhetoric reduces self-care to choice and discipline, disregarding the widespread lack of basic healthcare access.

Using Judy Segal's (2005) rhetorical framework of "Who is persuading whom of what?" and "What are the means of persuasion?" (p. 2), Paltrow persuades affluent women to invest in luxury wellness, portraying elite rituals as universally accessible. However, her rhetoric excludes working-class women, single parents, those with chronic illnesses dependent on public healthcare, and marginalized communities facing systemic barriers to wellness. This framing ultimately turns self-care into a consumerist pursuit, stripping it of its radical, collective origins. Paltrow's version of wellness, shaped by financial access, reinforces neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility while ignoring the structural inequalities that restrict access to self-care for most people. In doing so, Paltrow's consumerist framing of self-care not only depoliticizes a radical act but subtly upholds burnout culture. By suggesting that exhaustion is remedied through wellness consumption, her rhetoric shifts the blame of burnout onto the individual, furthering the normalization of systemic overwork, and selling luxury as recovery. This logic reframes structural neglect as personal failure, masking systemic harm behind the individualist narrative of elite self-optimization.

Lorde's reflections, on the contrary, predate the term burnout but critique the same dynamics that drive burnout culture today. Through being exploited and overworked, and experiencing self-erasure and systemic pressure to endure without rest, individuals have little agency to withdraw or recover from the demands imposed by racism, capitalism, and gendered labour. Having faced both breast and liver

cancer, Lorde articulated the politics of sustainability grounded in recognizing one's limits, balancing labour with restoration, and refusing the myth of boundless productivity. Rather than viewing rest as indulgence, she treated it as a disciplined form of self-preservation and political clarity, "I am learning to balance stress with periods of rest and restoration" (Lorde, 2017, p. 124). For Lorde, this balance was inseparable from community where she found strength not through isolation or self-optimization, but through reciprocal care among other Black women and lesbians. In contrast to burnout culture's glorification of individual endurance, Lorde's framework reclaims rest, interdependence, and vulnerability as radical acts of survival.

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Natasha Enquist is an undergraduate psychology student at the University of Victoria whose academic interests include human sexuality, feminist politics of embodiment, sexual wellness, and sexual health education. Before returning to Canada, she spent over a decade living and working in Orlando and Berlin, developing an artistic and performance career that prompted her return to university to study psychology, sexuality, and gender. Influenced by Audre Lorde’s writing and by intersectional, transnational feminist thought, her work is shaped by her Berlin experiences in creative, queer, feminist, fetish, and HIV-informed communities. The Rhetoric of Self-Care reflects her interest in how contemporary wellness narratives individualize responsibility while sidestepping structural inequities and the conditions that produce burnout. Natasha has worked as a research assistant on the community-led HIV and Eng/aging project, a graphic editor for youth empowerment initiatives, in healthcare settings, and plans to pursue graduate study focused on pleasure-centred approaches to gender equity and sexual health policy.

Remembering

Shelby Clark | University of Southern Mississippi

I stumble down the stairs, anxious to get into the office. Late again. Of course. This can't keep happening. I owe myself the permission to succeed. At least that's what Kelly said yesterday afternoon during our session. As I whip around the corner, I see a flash of black on the pale concrete behind me.

No.

It can't be here.

I got rid of it.

I don't need it anymore.

Out of sight, out of mind.

I will leave it behind me. Where it belongs.

A light layer of sweat coats my forehead when I finally sit down at my desk.

No, I didn't run to get here. I left early. I arrived right on time. Just like everyone else.

I can feel the presence of the receptionist—I can't remember her name—looming behind me. She's sitting at that exorbitantly large desk, and she's judging me. Somehow, I'm still sweating even though the running is over.

A large hand smacks the back of my left shoulder. "Good to have you back, big dog!" The voice is deep. It brushes over my head and blooms throughout the walls of my cubicle.

Don't call me that. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it." I stay facing my computer screen. This ritual does not require him to see my face.

The morning stretches into afternoon, and in turn, afternoon bows down to early evening. The day fills itself with mindless work and my constant forced thanks to empty greetings. It feels like before, for the most part. That's good. Kelly said we're trying to rebuild my sense of normalcy. Whatever that means. Apparently, normalcy requires painfully awkward interactions and incessant boredom. I would trust Kelly with my life. She is the reason I can be here today. I guess that means I must push through. I trudge through the daily duties: sending emails, reading memos, taking long trips to the restroom to stare at the wall.

Maybe it's better, though.

It's supposed to be better now.

I pack up my embarrassingly small collection of work items and say the obligatory good-byes.

"See ya tomorrow, man."

"Yeah, yeah, you can bet your ass they're gonna win tonight."

"Say hello to the Mrs. for me."

Somehow, I end up at the back of the pack of grey suits shuffling its way back to the parking lot. I walk slowly. The rest of these people are in a rush to get home. To take off their shoes and unclasp their bras.

I'm a bit busy rebuilding my sense of normalcy.

I'm meandering by the long brick wall that will lead me to my car, letting my fingertips brush up against its rough ridges, when it comes for me again. It's as if I could sense it this time. I try to breathe deeply. In through my nose and out through my mouth, like Kelly said to. Kelly might be a hack. I slowly turn around, feeling braver than I was during my morning flight. Maybe I am just tired of running. My fingers start to tingle like they're losing circulation. My blood buzzes. Then, I make eye contact with the expanse of black water.

It's okay. You're okay. Take deep breaths.

It's okay. You're okay. Take deep breaths.

It's okay. You're okay. Take deep breaths.

It's okay.

It flows over the sidewalk, spilling onto the grass surrounding it. It looks unending, though I know it to be contained by some force. Probably the same force that causes it to follow me. It sounds odd, but its intimidation is rooted in its pace. It always appears suddenly, yet when I see it, the water only ever appears to creep toward me by fractions of an inch at a time. However, I always know it's coming. That dark mass that craves to lick my ankles and crawl up my shins. It wants to live in my bones and drag me through the days. It doesn't speak to me. At least, not in a literal sense. I'm not that crazy. We just seem to have an understanding, me and this sea of black. It wants to cover me, to overwhelm every inch of my body, and I want to get as far away from it as possible.

I try to remain casual. I turn calm-

ly and resume my brisk march to the parking lot. But after a few strides, I just can't resist the urge to turn back and look at it.

It's closer.

Of course it's closer.

Deep breaths, right?

I can't.

I need to call Kelly.

I don't.

I walk faster. My brisk march turns into more of a trot. Then, a jog. I'm only a hundred yards away from safety. I'm sprinting. I'm not fast enough.

The water has always radiated cold. That's how I know it caught up with me. The cold started lapping at my feet.

Maybe Kelly was right. There's no way through it unless I face it.

Maybe it's finally time to grow up. Time to confront what I've done.

The thought brings me to a halt. I stop running. It feels like all my blood is rushing to my feet, pulling me down into the concrete, holding me in place. Despite my lead feet, I do what I must, and I face my stagnant pursuer.

The water pauses a breath from my skin, held in place like it's frozen in time by Kronos himself.

My eyes drift up over the surface that covers the lawn behind me. And of course, there she is. She stands in the middle of her sea, holding her small wooden bowl. From the bowl, water rushes out. Her dark hair brushes along the surface of the water below at, never truly wetting. A silver sheen reflects off her skin in what's left of the afternoon sun. Phantom fingers run through my hair like hers did when I was small.

She looks at me longingly, but never speaks, just like the still mass she stands in. Her silence says enough. I know why she's here. I know what she wishes me to atone for. I disappointed her, and she wants me to live with it. Her, I know. It's the water that I find continuously unsettling.

I wish I understood why it ran so black. The darkness makes it appear so evil, but how could that be? They're just my memories. The sea remembers what I chose to forget.

We make eye contact. Like usual, she's weeping silently. I feel an ache down in my chest and drop to my knees.

I'm so tired. It's time to surrender.

Then the water takes me.

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Energy Drinks and Burnout: A Research Analysis

Ella Wilcox | Utah State University

Abstract

This study-based analysis examines the most common energy drink additives (excluding sugar, sweeteners, and caffeine) and what they mean for Gen Z students and workers experiencing burnout. Aiming to make scientific knowledge more digestible and accessible to the average consumer, this analysis finds that the energy drink additives studied are generally beneficial with almost no drawbacks, particularly in the case of taurine. Besides being a semi-essential amino acid, recent studies have provided evidence that taurine can offset common negative cardiovascular effects of caffeine consumption. Given that taurine and caffeine are paired often in energy drinks, these findings are significant. Other additives studied include B-complex vitamins, tyrosine, ginseng, and L-carnitine. Severe negative reactions to these additives seem unlikely. All besides ginseng are necessary for healthy human function and not probable to produce adverse effects in their current amounts. These energy drink additives aid in cognitive function and could be helpful when fighting burnout.

Introduction

Widespread burnout is revolutionizing the way society thinks about combating it. The popularity of energy drinks in response to burnout is rising, but whether they are a helpful tool in combating burnout is debated. This research and analysis explores the effects of energy drink consumption on burnout, and how safe energy drinks are as an avenue for combating burnout. While the research below can be applied to anyone, the target audience is Gen Z, particularly those balancing multiple commitments such as work and school, as they are prime candidates for burnout. This is important because Gen Z is the next generation of workers, thinkers, inventors, and performers. Finding a way to excel that is not to the detriment of an individual's wellness is key as society continues to progress.

A study-based analysis was used to examine five of the most common energy drink additives—taurine, B-complex vitamins, ginseng, L-carnitine, and tyrosine—focusing on their benefits and potential drawbacks. The findings were surprisingly hopeful: most energy drink additives are not harmful in their current doses, and many are essential vitamins and compounds. Based on the sources studied for this article, it seems that energy drinks are not as poisonous or villainous as cultural stigma suggests. When consumed on a supplementary basis in tandem with good health practices, energy drinks can combat burnout by providing an extra boost in cognitive function, energy levels, and mood for health-conscious young people.

Disclaimers

It is important to reiterate that energy drinks are of maximum

benefit in countering burnout when combined with good health practices such as regular exercise, a nutritional diet, and quality sleep. If a healthy lifestyle is the foundation upon which wellness and vitality are built, then energy drinks are just the icing on the proverbial cake. In other words, energy drink consumption can supplement healthy practices, but is not a replacement for said practices, especially when trying to prevent and cope with burnout.

It should also be noted that the ingredients studied here are not definitively the five most common additives—just five that are common. A study by Jagimet et al. (2022) helped me determine which additives to focus on. The article yields data concerning the most common energy drink additives, classifying “additives” as the substances that differentiate energy drinks from other beverages. Thus, artificial sweeteners, colors, flavors, or caffeine were not examined, because they have been widely researched.

Taurine

Taurine is an amino acid. Important functions of taurine include bile acid conjugation, osmoregulation, anti-inflammatory activity, maintenance of mitochondrial function, and production of adenosine triphosphate (ATP). It is put in energy drinks because it mitigates negative cardiovascular effects, has antioxidant properties, and helps regulate neurotransmitter activity. An outlandish myth about taurine claims that it is made from bull sperm. This is untrue; taurine used in energy drinks is synthetic. Taurine can offset the negative cardiovascular effects of caffeine when consumed (Schaffer 2014). While caffeine is linked to higher blood pressure, taurine has been found to lower both systolic and diastolic blood pressure, making the two components complementary. Risk of ischemic

heart disease has also been found to decrease when taurine is consumed with caffeine. Due to its studied benefits, taurine has been used to treat heart failure in Japan since 1985. Taurine is also an antiarrhythmic agent and can increase contractile function when coupled with caffeine, where caffeine alone does not increase contractile function.

Neural Protection

Taurine has also been shown to have protective effects in the brain. A 2016 study by Qin Wang and others, featured in the scholarly journal *Amino Acids*, tests the consequences of taurine supplementation in rats with traumatic brain injuries. As mentioned before, taurine is an antioxidant which aids in both mitochondrial function and the production of ATP (Qin Wang et al., 2016). In rats inflicted with traumatic brain injuries, those injected with 200 mg taurine once daily for 7 days had increased cerebral blood flow (CBF), and no neuronal damage compared to the control group. While this study's findings cannot be extrapolated to humans, taurine's role in increasing CBF and aiding mitochondrial function has major implications for physiological effects on the brain.

Potential Health Risks: Dehydration and Medication Interaction

One question raised about taurine is its link with diuresis and dehydration. Diuresis refers to increased or excessive urine production and is positively correlated with caffeine consumption. Diuresis and dehydration are not the same, but diuresis can be a precursor to dehydration. Does taurine, therefore, cause dehydration? An article, authored by Steven W. Schaffer and others, published in *Amino Acids* (2014), addresses this question. Animal studies have provided evidence that taurine does, in fact, cause diuresis. However, a 2006 study by Riesenhu-

ber et. al. tested taurine's potential for dehydrating athletes who consumed energy drinks. The conclusion was reinforced that caffeine increases diuresis, but there was no evidence found to support that taurine increases diuresis or causes dehydration. No significant evidence has been found that links taurine to dehydration; studies mentioned in Schaffer's article that claimed to link taurine to dehydration had procedural flaws that made their conclusions invalid, such as a lack of a control group.

Another risk associated with taurine is that, in high doses, it can interact badly with some medications. Speaking to the Cleveland Clinic, registered dietitian Julia Zumpano (2023) explains that "taurine works as a cytochrome P-450 enzyme inhibitor." This means that when a drug uses the cytochrome P-450 enzyme to metabolize, taurine could increase concentration of said drug by slowing its clearance from the body. However, Cleveland Clinic states that the amount of taurine in energy drinks is not enough to cause negative interactions with medications. While it's important to note the possible risks of medication interaction with taurine when considering supplementation, the Cleveland Clinic states it's not likely to be affected by energy drink consumption.

B-Complex Vitamins

Another additive studied was the group of B-complex vitamins. Vitamins B6, B12, and B3 are the most common in energy drinks. These three vitamins can also be identified as pyridoxine, cobalamin, and niacin, respectively (UK National Health Society, 2020).

Vitamin B6, or pyridoxine, is essential for the formation of hemoglobin and "plays an important role in over 100 enzyme reactions" (Cronkleton, 2024). B6 is not syn-

thesized in the body, so it must be obtained through diet. Vitamin B12, called cobalamin, also helps produce red blood cells to carry oxygen around the body. Cobalamin helps form the protective layer, called the myelin sheath, around nerves. B12 also helps safeguard neurotransmitters in the brain from degenerative diseases. (MS Trust, 2021). Like the other B vitamins, niacin (vitamin B3) plays a huge part in metabolism by helping cells turn food into energy. It also helps maintain healthy skin and digestive function and can help lower blood pressure by dilating blood vessels.

Potential Health Risks: High Levels of B-Vitamins in Energy Drinks

Most energy drinks contain 100-1000% of the daily value for B-vitamins. High levels of B vitamins can cause serious symptoms to emerge. However, because B-vitamins are water-soluble, it is unlikely that the amount of B vitamins in energy drinks will cause negative side effects (Zumpano, 2023). Except for B12, which can be stored in the liver for many years, water-soluble vitamins cannot be stored in the body and are disposed of in urine daily. Water-soluble vitamins must be consumed regularly to prevent deficiencies (Manetti, 2024). Since B-vitamins are flushed out of the body daily, their amounts in energy drinks do not pose a toxicity risk, if consumption of said drink is not excessive.

L-carnitine, found in 16 percent of energy drinks (Jagim and others 2022), is another amino acid synthesized in the body. In an article titled "Exploring Zn(II)-acetyl L-carnitine complex for simultaneous management of depression, chronic pain, and neuroprotection" (Caro-Ramírez et al., 2025), the authors dive into one specific compound, acetyl-L-carnitine, and its functions. Acetyl-L-carnitine has been found to help treat

depression, with a deficiency in it being a factor in the development of major depressive disorder (Post, 2018). Like taurine, L-carnitine is being studied in relation to ischemic heart disease and is suggested to have positive effects on cardiovascular health. Both taurine and L-carnitine have been shown to improve contractile function in the heart due to increased mitochondrial and ATP function. L-carnitine is also a known antioxidant; its role as an anti-inflammatory agent decreases the risk of diseases such as coronary artery disease (CAD), angina, heart attack, and heart failure. L-carnitine also aids in neuroprotection (Mount Sinai, "Carnitine"). The importance of L-carnitine cannot be overstated. As the body produces L-carnitine, dietary supplementation is not usually necessary, as covered by the Mount Sinai article. Consuming over 5 grams a day can invite side effects such as diarrhea and rash. However, most popular energy drinks don't even contain one-tenth of that amount. The effects of L-carnitine are nearly all positive, and as long as it is consumed in moderation, it is highly unlikely to cause harm.

Tyrosine

Tyrosine is an amino acid synthesized from phenylalanine and is necessary for the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and dopamine, which aid in mood elevation and can increase mental focus—something many people experiencing burnout struggle with. Tyrosine also helps create the body's enzymes, proteins, and tissues (Van De Walle, 2023).

A study published in the National Library of Medicine (2023) showed that an increase in dietary tyrosine increases cognitive function across all age ranges, especially when dopamine and norepinephrine levels are low. For example, when someone is in a high-stress environment, tyrosine is shown to elevate mood and improve mental focus. Research

shows tyrosine is not common in big-name energy drinks; however, it is abundant in drinks marketed to improve mental focus. For example, the Gorilla Mind Energy drink contains 1000 mg of tyrosine. While this may seem excessive, the upper limit for tyrosine in a day is 12 grams, well above the included amount in the Gorilla Mind Energy drink.

Ginseng

Historically, ginseng has been claimed as an herb for any ailment, with its root believed to possess medicinal properties. Supposed characteristics of ginsenosides include antioxidant, anticancer, and anti-aging effects, but the literature surrounding them does not provide conclusive evidence. Despite its historical use, ginseng has limited proven benefits. Unlike the previously discussed ingredients, which must be taken in excessive doses to produce negative side effects, their benefits are backed by ample evidence. The articles about ginseng used for this study also concluded that the root or its extracts must be consumed in high doses to yield negative side effects. However, whether ginseng's purported benefits can be empirically verified remains uncertain (University of Rochester, 2023).

While there are 11 different species in this genus, *P. ginseng* is the species generally referred to as "ginseng" (Potenza and others 2023). There is even a class of substances known as ginsenosides.

An article for the National Poison Control Center cautions those considering ginseng supplementation, remarking that "Natural" does not always mean "safe" (Liu & Troutman, n.d.....). In the article, Liu & Troutman outlines the possible consequences of consuming ginseng. Ginseng supplementation doses vary widely, but most are around 2 grams of root daily, or 200 mg of ginseng extract (Liu, 2018). Ginseng can

interact with other substances and cause adverse effects, including "nervousness, insomnia, changes in blood pressure, breast pain, vaginal bleeding, vomiting, diarrhea, and mania" (Liu & Troutman, n.d.). Among these substances are, "caffeine, alcohol, blood-thinners, medications for the treatment of HIV, diabetic medications, immunosuppressants, antidepressants, bitter orange, ephedra, and bitter mallow." While extreme symptoms are rare, Liu & Troutman recommends speaking to a doctor before consuming ginseng supplements. The article also cites a 2015 study by the New York Attorney General's Office which examined herbal products, including ginseng, from Walmart, Target, Walgreens, and GNC. Seventy-nine percent of the products did not contain the plants they claimed to, and a significant amount contained unknown contaminants. All this is not to say that ginseng is dangerous; however, it is included in around 30 percent of energy drinks (Jagim et al., 2022) and should be a consideration for those who are health conscious.

Conclusion

The purpose in researching and writing this paper was to gain a clearer picture of energy drinks: what they are made of, what ingredients are potentially harmful, and how they can be tools in fighting burnout for Gen Z workers and students. The sources for this article indicate that at least five of the most common additives in energy drinks—taurine, B vitamins, L-carnitine, tyrosine, and ginseng—are not inherently harmful. The unfamiliar names scare some consumers away, but upon closer inspection, many of the ingredients are necessary for optimal function. No energy drinks contain harmful levels of the vitamins, amino acids, and herbs discussed above. Shared traits that are helpful in lessening burnout include: a) improvement of mental focus and mood, b) aid in cardiovascular func-

tion, and c) aid in cognitive function and neuroprotection.

Energy drinks are not a long-term solution for burnout. "Solving" burnout is a systemic process that would involve changing fundamental institutions in today's culture. Gen Z students and workers cannot control the economic and socio-political environment they are thrust into, nor can they necessarily control what happens in their lives. Burnout and exhaustion will ebb and flow like ocean waves. What Gen Z can do is decide how they will react to it. They may not be able to choose a job they love, but they can decide to make the best of it. They may not be able to banish exhaustion completely, but they can use energy drinks responsibly to help them make it through.

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Why Does Rest Matter? Especially at a PWI University for BIPOC Individuals

Alexandra Zook | *Smith College*

In high school, I had eight leadership positions, a 4.0 GPA, and was enrolled in the five hardest classes my school had to offer. And yet, I was still convinced I could do better and work harder. The thought of getting into college made me nauseous because I honestly didn't think I did well enough to get into a "good" school. I was drinking 3-4 cups of coffee a day, barely getting enough sleep, and always on the brink of burnout—not caring how detrimental it was for my health. I needed to do better.

This is the backstory and high school experience of many of my fellow Smith College students, who are always on the brink of burnout. Most of the time they are multitasking to the fullest extent, not making enough time for adequate rest. This is especially true for BIPOC individuals working double time to keep up with their white peers.

The data bears this out—a 2023 Center for Economic and Policy Research report found Black college graduates unemployed at twice the rate of white graduates across five different majors, showing that from the get-go, there is prejudice against BIPOC individuals to even get a seat at the table (Austin, 2023).

Students at an all-women's college, like Smith College, are more susceptible to what Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski (2019), in their book *Burnout*, call "Human Giver Syndrome." Human Giver Syndrome is the expectation that women constantly must be giving; and

when they are not giving, they feel an overwhelming amount of guilt. Nagoski and Nagoski also argue that women struggle with an "invisible workspace"—the feeling that they are continuously on duty and expected to give up their sleep for the convenience of others. Considering that Smith is an all-women's college, and Human Giver Syndrome especially affects women, it's more likely that students at Smith struggle with Human Giver Syndrome. If true, it's no wonder that many Smith students appear to be overworked and put aside rest for productivity. From personal experience this is especially prevalent on Fridays and weekends when the library is full of students. However, Human Giver Syndrome was the most prevalent to me during "Mountain Day." Mountain day is a surprise day off from classes so students have the chance to celebrate the autumn season. This is a cherished tradition for many Smith students; however, over my time here, I have also noticed how busy the library becomes on mountain day, with students using this celebratory day to rest as extra time to work.

An adequate night of sleep is not something we can replace for a cup of coffee. Rest is not a debatable matter, because it's something we need not only to thrive but to survive. Many Smith students, like myself, will often substitute caffeine for sleep because it leaves more time for productivity. Nagoski and Nagoski (2019) note that depriving ourselves of sleep will lead to burnout. Not only does burnout significantly impact our health, but it also

makes us turn in lesser quality work. Furthermore, rest should matter because it makes us happier and healthier human beings, not only because it enables greater productivity. Recognition that we matter as humans—and not just based on our performance and productivity—can be difficult, especially for BIPOC individuals who are part of a system that wasn't made for them to succeed.

This brings me to my second point: it is not only difficult for women to rest, but more so for BIPOC women. In the *New York Times* best-seller, *Rest is Resistance*, Tricia Hersey (2022) talks about how rest can be used as resistance to grind culture, capitalism, and white supremacy. Hersey also believes that rest is reclaiming our dream space—a safe environment to rejuvenate our bodies and rest, where just existing can be enough. Hersey goes on to argue that resting, especially for Black bodies, is a form of resistance to capitalism. Thus, disregard for the body (i.e. depriving the body of sleep) gives into capitalism and the mentality that "we are sleep-deprived because the systems view us as machines, but bodies are not machines" (Hersey, 2022). However, resting challenges—even disrupts—that narrative.

Grind culture is already a given for an intense academic environment like Smith College. Hersey states that "academia is the headquarters for grind culture". From personal experience and observation from my peers, I don't think anyone would disagree with this statement. This is especially evident during weekends, where peers, as well as myself, will put the success of their academics over extracurriculars and even sleep. Since Smith is also a PWI (Primarily White Institution), it only makes Smith's grind culture more significant for BIPOC students. These students are surrounded by peers who have had different opportuni-

ties and have had society see them through a different lens. This has the potential to greatly affect BIPOC students' academic performance. Rest, therefore, is so important for a BIPOC individual, because they are in an environment that wasn't made for them to succeed. Instead of burning out and giving into the capitalist society, resting their body will heal and allow them to combat this disadvantage.

Burnout is more likely among BIPOC students for many reasons, one of which is the pressure to keep up with their white peers. Additionally, at a historically all-women's college such as Smith College, students are more likely to be affected by "Human Giver Syndrome"—the expectation for women to be continuously giving without putting themselves, their bodies, or their rest first. Yet, rest could be used as resistance against grind culture, capitalism, and white supremacy, by taking care of the body. Rest is vital, for me and for you. No matter our race or gender, we need rest to survive. If I have learned anything from high school, it's not that $y = mx + b$, or that the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell, but rather that rest and taking care of myself matters, because I matter.

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Sanctuary in Solidarity: Reimagining Self-Care in a Burnout Culture

Alexis O'Neal | *The University of Arizona*

Introduction

In an era defined by the “hustle” and the “grind,” we are constantly pushed to do more, be more and meet expectations that feel increasingly impossible. Burnout culture is no longer just a workplace hazard but it is now a societal baseline. It manifests in the compulsive need to monetize our hobbies, the guilt we feel during “unproductive” rest, and the relentless notification pings that blur the lines between our professional and private lives. For many of us, burnout feels like a slow-burning exhaustion, a sense that no matter how fast we run, the finish line is being pushed farther away.

While this culture thrives on the myth of individual productivity, the solution isn't just a solo spa day or a better calendar app. To truly dismantle this cycle, we must shift our focus from individual achievement to collective well-being. By addressing burnout through communal self-care, we can start to reduce societal pressures and redefine success through the lens of collaboration rather than competition.

Fostering resilient communities, encouraging supportive institutional structures and leveraging Gen Z's innovative approaches to digital boundaries and transparency are crucial for creating sanctuary through solidarity. By measuring our worth through the strength of our networks rather than the length of our to-do lists, we can finally find a sustainable way forward.

Understanding Burnout in a Productivity-Driven World

The consequences of burnout are multifaceted, dismantling an individual's health across several dimensions. Mentally, those suffering from this syndrome often sacrifice their psychological stability, experiencing marked increases in anxiety and depression (Chong et al., 2025). This decay quickly translates to the physical body; chronic stress leads to significant sleep disturbances and weakened immune systems (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). Furthermore, burnout erodes spiritual well-being, often resulting in a profound loss of purpose and a sense of disconnection from one's community and self.

According to Edú-Valsania, Laguía, and Moriano (2022), burnout is a specific psychological syndrome defined by “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization [cynicism] and a reduced sense of professional efficacy.” This emotional exhaustion is particularly insidious, as it involves a feeling of being completely drained by the psychological efforts required at work (Lee et al., 2023). When this negative culture takes hold, it does more than harm personal well-being; it actively stifles the creativity and collaboration necessary for a healthy society.

Pioneering psychology researcher Maslach and later Maslach and Jackson (1981) introduced burnout into the scientific literature and explained that “burnout is not just an

individual problem; it is an occupational phenomenon that results from chronic stress in the workplace” (World Health Organization, 2019). Maslach's extensive work, including the development of the widely used Maslach Burnout Inventory, which measures emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment, has been crucial in formally recognizing and defining burnout and its risk factors, leading to its official recognition by the World Health Organization in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). The ICD-11 is the global standard for health data and clinical documentation, providing a unified language that allows health professionals worldwide to define, bridge, and monitor health-related conditions (World Health Organization, 2019). This classification officially recognizes burnout as a phenomenon exclusive to the occupational context.

The Role of Institutions in Fostering Well-being

Institutions such as schools, universities, workplaces, and even broader societal systems play a huge role in perpetuating or helping to alleviate burnout culture. In both academic and professional settings, the relentless pursuit of productivity leads to widespread burnout. Constant pressure to perform often leads students and employees to make sacrifices just to keep up. For example, contemporary research highlights that student populations are increasingly susceptible to burnout due to overwhelming academic workloads and the high-stakes nature of modern education (Chong et al., 2025).

The expectation of continuous availability and the diminishing separation between work and personal life—often exacerbated by the “always-on” nature of digital platforms—have significantly contributed to this widespread culture. This

“on-call” mentality is particularly damaging as emotional exhaustion tends to fluctuate and grow across the workday based on immediate job demands and a lack of recovery time (Lee et al., 2023). Rather than creating spaces where people can truly thrive, burnout culture reduces individuals to their professional or academic contributions. This focus on output over well-being is often a direct result of a lack of social support within the institutional structure; without strong supportive networks at work or school, the risk of burnout significantly increases (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2013). This systemic issue highlights the urgent need for a more effective and collective approach to well-being that moves beyond individual responsibility and demands institutional change.

There are compelling examples of institutions actively working to reverse the trend of overwork and foster cultures of well-being. Certain companies, recognizing the detrimental effects of exhaustion on long-term output, have instituted structural changes to challenge the traditional “always-on” lifestyle. Notably, organizational interventions aimed at the work structure include job redesign to improve the quality of work and the humanization of schedule to implement work-life balance plans (Edú-Valsania, Laguía, & Moriano, 2022).

On a broader scale, national systems, such as those in Nordic countries, consistently lead global well-being rankings. This success is due to institutionalized policies like extensive paid parental leave, generous vacation allowances, and robust public health infrastructures that inherently value personal time over professional output (Chong et al., 2025). Significantly, many Western European countries prioritize life over career by practicing cultural norms like late starts, extended mid-day breaks, and mandated rest peri-

ods for employees (Charoensukmongkol et al., 2013). These institutions actively work to redefine success outside of sheer work volume.

Rather than focusing solely on output, these examples represent the necessity and success within structural changes that promote a healthier balance between work and life. This could mean offering flexible schedules, encouraging mental health days, and creating programs that focus on milestones and growth over immediate metrics. By valuing community-building efforts and support, institutions can create environments where collective achievements are celebrated, and success is measured in terms of personal development, collaboration, and overall well-being. A supportive school environment is crucial in mitigating student burnout, suggesting that institutional focus on a healthy school environment could significantly reduce burnout among students (Chong et al., 2025).

The Power of Communal Self-Care

Self-care has become a popular way to cope with intense demands, but it often falls short when regarded as a solo mission. While individual rest is vital, trying to fight burnout alone in high-pressure environments only addresses the symptoms, not the cause. Charoensukmongkol et al. (2013) found that problem-focused coping is most effective when individuals have greater control over their stressors. This is where the individual becomes communal: while one person may not have the power to change an entire institutional culture, a collective network can exert control by setting group boundaries. By building networks focused on shared experiences, we shift from passive endurance to active, collective resistance.

Community can look like many things: friends, family, classmates,

or colleagues, all of whom play a role in shaping how we experience burnout. When we share our struggles, we break the stigma that frames burnout as a personal failure. This is critical because Emotional Contagion Theory (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993) suggests that burnout can actually “spread” through work groups via shared negative emotions. However, communal care flips this script. Research on peer support programs in nursing and teaching demonstrates that shared, non-hierarchical communication—like “decompression circles”—significantly reduces emotional exhaustion (Nelson & Migliano, 2025). Coworker support is strongly and negatively associated with the core symptoms of burnout, as support groups remain one of the most effective interventions for occupational stress (Lee et al., 2023). In practice, this looks like an academic department collectively establishing “no-reply weekends,” shifting the burden of “staying connected” from the individual to a shared departmental standard.

Beyond open communication, active participation in collective practices further solidifies the benefits of communal self-care. Interventions that train groups in emotional management and resilience help create spaces where mental health is prioritized over sheer productivity (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). These diverse approaches emphasize that well-being is a mutual responsibility.

Gen Z and the Redefinition of Self-Care

Gen Z is currently at the forefront of this shift, leveraging digital platforms to transform self-care from a private luxury into a public act of solidarity. While social media is often blamed for “burnout-inducing” comparison, it is being repurposed for digital accountability. For example, the “Study With Me” live-stream trend on platforms like TikTok creates “body doubling” opportunities,

where thousands of students work “together” to combat the isolation of remote study.

This is a fundamental redefinition of self-care: it moves from consumption (buying a product to feel better) to connection (using a platform to set boundaries). Digital accountability groups now use shared calendars to commit to “non-productive” time, transforming “Do Not Disturb” modes into a badge of collective honor rather than a sign of laziness. As Al Wafah, Ryan, and Ningsih (2025) note, TikTok provides positive benefits when used to share inspiring experiences and gain educational knowledge. By using hashtags like #BurnoutCulture to find “collective validation,” Gen Z is proving that while problematic internet use is a risk factor, strong social support—even when digital—creates a protective barrier against student burnout (Chong et al., 2025).

Conclusion

While self-care is an essential tool for navigating modern life, its true power is unlocked only when it is practiced in community. We are currently living through a transition period where the “hustle” is being exposed for what it is: an unsustainable myth. Instead of merely surviving within these systems, we have the opportunity to find sanctuary through solidarity.

To achieve this, we need more than just intent; we need concrete institutional shifts. Universities can move beyond “Wellness Wednesdays” and instead implement “Restorative Grading” policies or mandatory “pencils down” periods where no assignments are due across the entire campus. Workplaces can adopt Transparency Logs, where teams openly discuss workload capacity before new projects are assigned, ensuring that collaboration isn’t just a buzzword for more work.

On a personal level, this means looking at the person next to us, the tired classmate or the overwhelmed colleague, and realizing that their exhaustion is not a reflection of their worth, but a symptom of a system that needs changing. By measuring success through the health of our relationships and our ability to support one another through the “grind,” we can create communities that don’t just survive the pressure, but actively dismantle it. When we rest together, we rise together.

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A graduating senior at the University of Arizona, **Alexis O'Neal** is completing a double major in Psychology and Business Management. Her academic interests center on health psychology, specifically how modern society and organizational structures impact our physical and mental well-being. In her future, Alexis hopes to focus on adolescents and those in high-stress careers, and explore the factors that build resilience in complex systems. She is dedicated to applying these insights to create healthier, more sustainable environments within the modern workforce.

Look Away

Kayley Liu | University of Utah



My piece *Look Away* depicts a stressed-out woman with a look of agony on her face. Using her own hands to pull her eyes back due to anxiousness and discomfort of the eyes that seem to follow her from behind. She's looking down to avoid the gaze of others and is staring down at a table that displays the words "LOOK AWAY" in bright red.

In my artwork, I try to explore the feeling of academic stress and the pressures that are put on students by parents and teachers. The expectations of others can force us to suppress what it is that we truly feel, and we begin to lose motivation to complete daily tasks, let alone complete homework assignments. The woman in the painting is shown to be in a difficult mental state, mainly due to others always pressuring or judging her. I try to demonstrate the theme of burnout by using more dull/dark colors, as I see the world a bit more bleak when I start to lose motivation in school or hobbies that used to interest me. I painted only eyes behind the woman to give the viewer a sense that even though there isn't always someone next to judging you, their impact still lingers when you're alone.

Kaylee Liu is a second-year psychology student at the University of Utah. She hopes to become a researcher with a focus on developmental psychology. Kayley has always had an interest in art and hopes to be able to still have the passion to create art as she continues her education.

Burning Through Burnout: A Collaborative Project

Sophia Matthews, Kamanay Belcher, & Talia Hincks
Rider University

This collaborative project, Burning Through Burnout, seeks to communicate a simple message: burnout is complicated. It's messy, overwhelming, and draining. It changes the way we think, act, and feel.

In a project completed as part of our coursework as English majors at Rider University, we created a multimodal essay in which we each used different forms and genres to explore the concept of burnout. Our goal is to highlight how burnout affects everyone uniquely, and to show that healing from burnout is just as complicated as experiencing it.

In our project, we drew inspiration from our own personal lives and our experiences as college students during finals. Belcher was impacted by her experiences while taking 19 credits and used songwriting as a form of expression for her burnout. Hincks was influenced by her relationship with academic work and attempted to use this essay to understand and reignite her love for learning. Matthews was inspired by her experiences during finals and by how it becomes increasingly difficult for her to create cohesive work as the semester ends, which informed the segmentation in her collage.

This was an unusual project: collaborating in hybrid media forms across classrooms in a personalized assignment. Completing this project gave our team the space to both process burnout and discover different ways to combat it. We hope you enjoy Burning Through Burnout.

Burning Through Burnout: A Collaborative Project

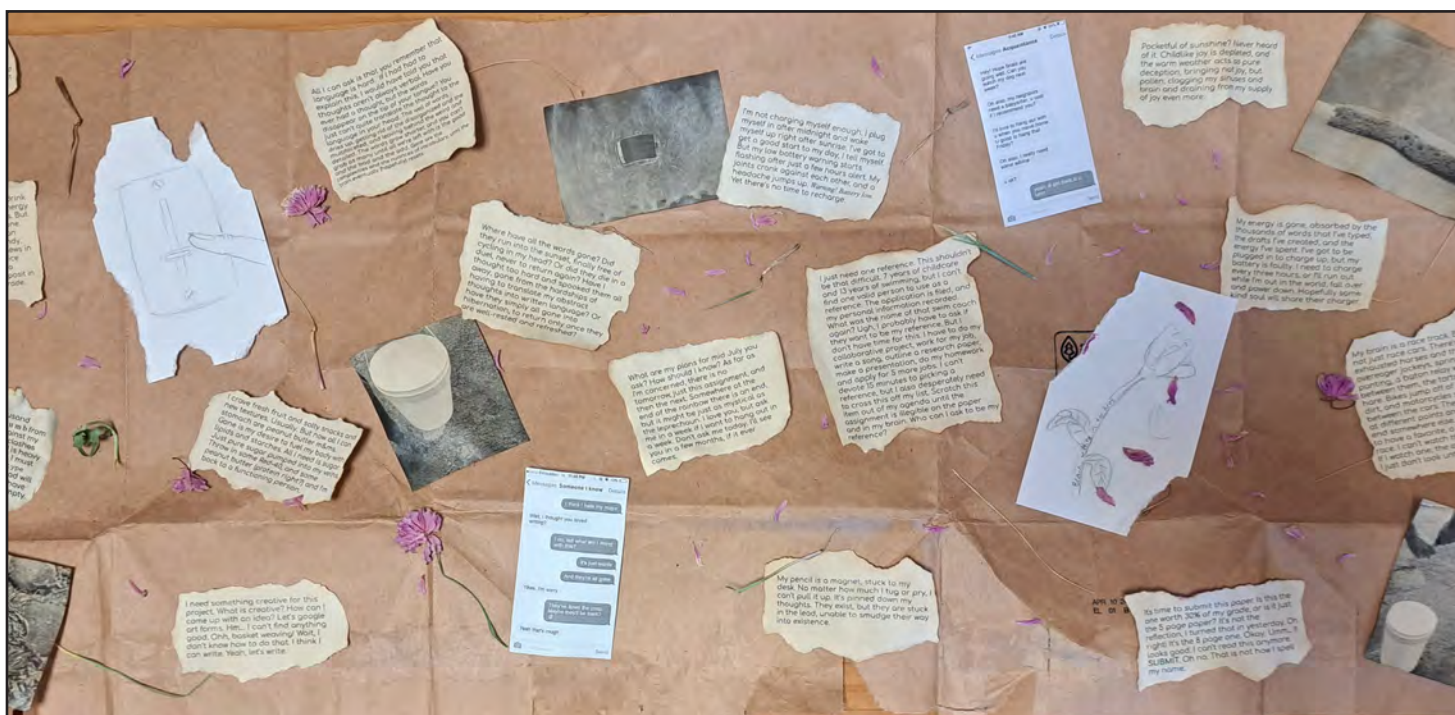
Scraps of My Mind

Sophia Matthews | Rider University

In “Scraps of My Mind” I decided to create a collage to explore burnout and provide a tangible reminder of the mental effects that burnout can create. As a college student, I regularly experience burnout twice a year, when my semesters come to a close.

The segmentation in this piece reflects the segmentation within my brain during finals. So often finals require cohesion in long works, drying up the well of ideas in my head to the extent that forming cohesive, creative pieces can be a struggle. The combination of written works, photography, pressed flowers, and simulated text messages represents the collection of responsibilities that a college student must attend to as the semester draws to a close.

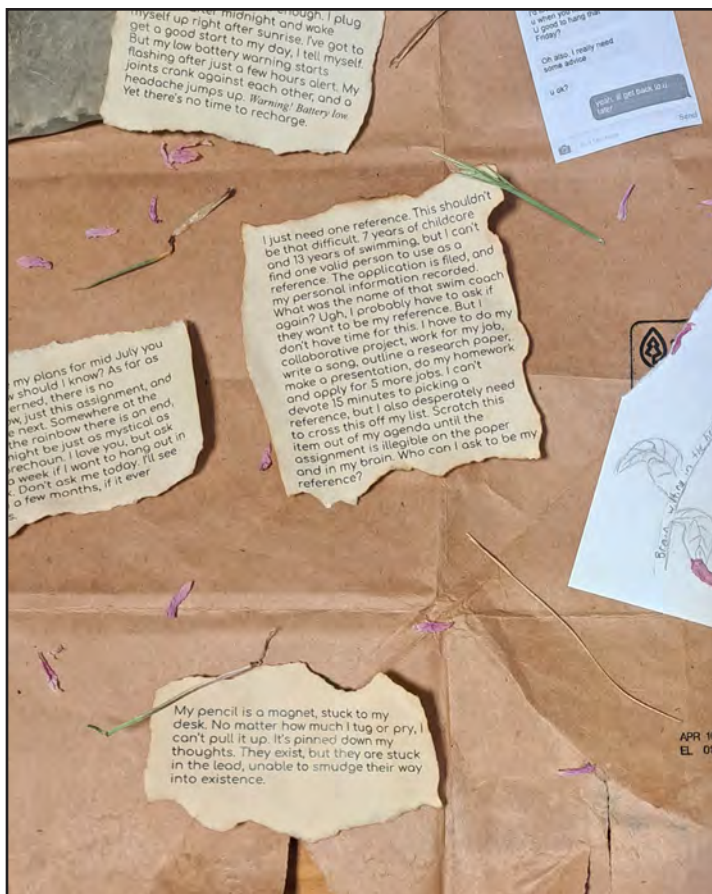
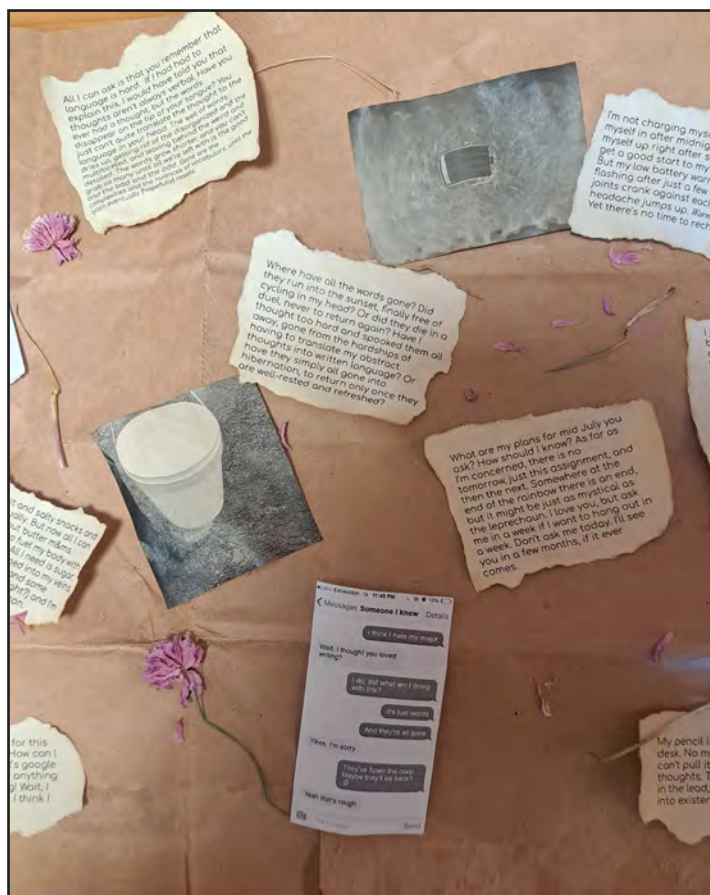
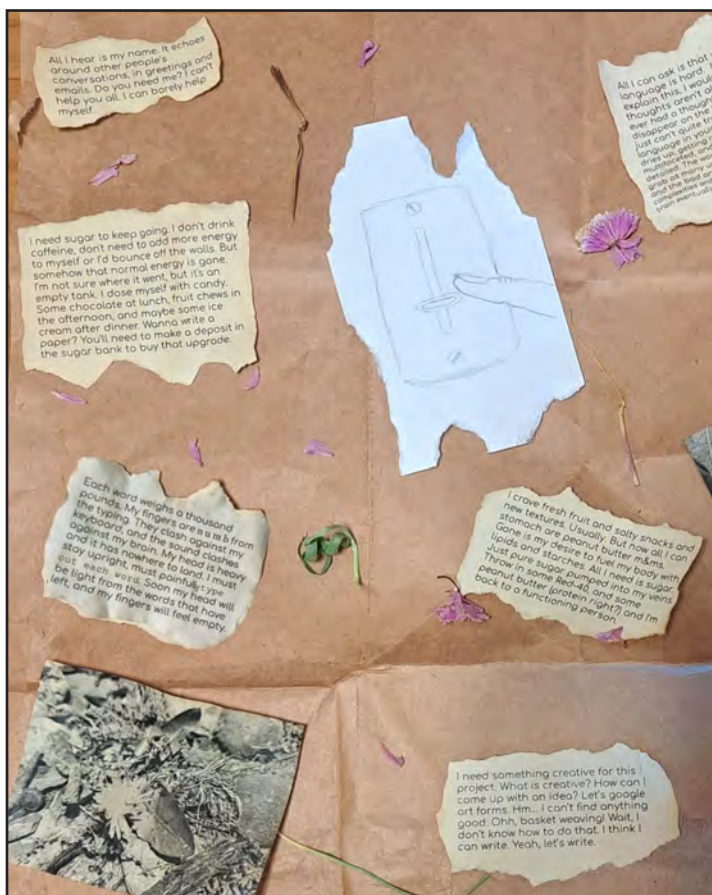
Words have power but so do symbols and nature. Regardless of how you overcome burnout, I hope this collage inspires you. The power of creating art can allow you to process and understand your burnout. Find the art forms that give you a sense of release.



Full collage view of “Scraps of My Mind” by Sophia Matthews.

Sophia Matthews is a senior English major with a Writing Concentration at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. She is also pursuing a minor in Communication Studies, a certificate in Publishing and Professional Writing, and is a member of Rider’s Baccalaureate Honors Program. On campus, Sophia serves as the secretary of the Nu Phi Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and works in the Writing Studio as a Student Writing Consultant. Outside of the classroom, Sophia enjoys supporting Philly sports teams, dancing, swimming, playing basketball, reading, watching water polo, and going on adventures with friends. Sophia is from Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, where she lives with her parents and siblings.

Detail views of “Scraps of My Mind” by Sophia Matthews.



Burning Through Burnout: A Collaborative Project Girl on Fire

Talia Hincks | Rider University

The sun has come up, the house is quiet, and I am all that moves. Not even the dog stirs as I slide across the tan carpet and kneel before the fireplace. Its glass face is covered with grime, and beside it lie logs stacked in their bed. Inside the fireplace, there is warmth buried deep in the ashes, which, to the touch, are cooler even than my bare feet. Dawn spills over my living room through the wide glass doors overlooking our porch. There, chickadees perch by the birdfeeder, dropping seeds to the ground where sparrows peck and hop. They are hungry. I am hungry, too, but when I step into our dark, west-facing kitchen, I grab a scuffed-up rag from under the sink and a small, pink bowl of water.

Slowly, so as not to spill, I bring them to the fireplace and unlatch its face. Droplets fall from the rag as I dip it in the bowl and scrub the glass. Heat-baked grime disappears under my fingers, leaving the glass clean and glossy. Every iron crevice I can find is polished in a meditative state. I don't know why. It's not necessary; we never clean the inside of the fireplace. Why bother when it will be covered in ash the next moment? I don't know. I don't. But it feels important, and it is only once the glass is spotless that I gather my kindling—balls of newspaper, twiggy sticks—and build a pyramid.

My thumbs catch on the child safety lock of our lighter, and when the flame finally clicks into being, I aim it at my creation and bring it to life. By the time Mom has woken up, I'm eating a bowl of cornflakes

in front of our glowing fireplace. It is June; we haven't lit the fireplace since our last snowfall. I ask if we can watch Clifford.

That was the first fire I lit on my own—no guidance, no orders. I made a fire because I wanted it: because I had an idea, and I was inspired. Something sparked in my chest. I was a spark. I was on fire. I've been burning ever since.

Burn fast, burn bright, burn out.

At nineteen, I am a comet. We're coming out of the pandemic, a year spent in solitude and quiet, and it's finally my time to enter the real world. I'm an adult with a job and a license, and I'm going to college. In my classes, I go above and beyond, reading every chapter and taking extensive notes, taking every practice quiz twice. My discussion posts are double the length of my peers' posts. If the word minimum is 350, I'll do 500, or 700, maybe even 900. Multiple professors tell me that I really don't need to do so much, and imply I probably have better places to spend my time. And yet, it is my time, and I spend it where I want to.

My extensive homework habits are not (solely) instilled by doubts that I, a lifelong homeschooler, can ever keep up with the "school kids." Instead, they come from a genuine enjoyment of learning. I like writing argumentative defenses of the transporters in *Star Trek*. It's hard to describe my excitement (and pride) when I write a 350-word analysis about a single apostrophe in *An*

Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge by Ambrose Bierce. It is extensive, and perhaps ridiculous, but to me, that is the whole point—to spend time and effort—to really work on something and transform it into more than it was before. To say, "I did that." It is heartbreaking when I realize not everyone feels the same.

I'm in a grand ballroom, setting dinner tables with a coworker. Her back is to me, but I see her expression in elegant mirrors that line the walls. Her eyes are downcast, and her face blank as she sets the silverware. It is the start of the day, when the sun still shines through the windows, setting everything alight. By the time we leave this room, it will be dark, well past nightfall. As we fold napkins and polish silverware, we lament how busy we are. Balancing work and school is manageable, but these late nights put an additional layer of stress on top of our weekly deadlines. I tell my coworker that after we get out tonight, I have to read a chapter of my history textbook, write a short essay, sleep as long as I can, and then be back for a morning shift. She shakes her head and laughs.

It's not mean, not at all; she just says, "You know, you're the only person I know who actually reads the whole chapter."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, just pick a page and read it. Write the essay on that page. It would save you so much time."

This is an option I have never considered. Yes, duh, it would save time, but what's the point in that? I'm taking the class to learn, aren't I? Are all my classmates using this time-saving technique? One simple conversation, and I feel as if a mirror shatters. A tiny crack in the silver starts as a pinpoint and splinters across the sheet, the image ruined. My perspective on education shifts.

Classes aren't about understanding a concept to the best of one's ability. Homework isn't about ingrain-ing the knowledge into your brain and your habits; it's all about getting a passing grade and how much work you have to do to get there. Why bother going above and beyond if you could simply go above? Why push yourself to new heights when you can see just fine from where you're standing? Better yet, when you're tired and overworked and barely hanging on, and you're only graded on a paragraph-long assignment, why the fuck would you read the full chapter? I know my answer: because I love it—because I am hungry to learn. But I can no longer assume anyone else feels the same. In the back of my mind sits what I had never before seen as an option: doing the bare minimum.

Soon, classes become redundant, and I get bored. It isn't on purpose; maybe I've worked a double shift or have more than a few projects due, but more and more often, I put in that bare minimum. I am rewarded all the same.

Oh, I think. It's that easy.

Quite simply, it is that easy. I never slack off, I never turn in my work late, and I repeatedly hand in assignments I barely understand; my grades are not affected. I hope someone will call me out and point out my mediocrity, but they never do. Filled with twisted pride and dull horror, I watch as my achievements are celebrated. More than once, a professor takes my assignment and prints it out. I am the example all other students should follow, but I am in no condition to guide anyone. It's not that I'm wandering blind, I'm just aimless. I'm thriving academically, but I can't tell anyone how or why. There's no process, nothing I can tutor, and no strategies I can suggest. Nothing is new. Everything I say, I've said before, and anything I do is received with

applause. It all feels meaningless because my joy for learning is gone. I stop pushing myself.

That's the thing about burnout, it doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't just happen from an over-load. Sometimes it is born from monotony. Sometimes it is the same day playing over and over again: same hallways, same people, same work. No new twigs. No newspaper. No logs. Not even a bucket of water poured down to douse your flames, no sand meant to suffocate, but the fire dies all the same. Why fuel your fire—why waste resources—when the world doesn't care if you burn?

Burn fast, burn bright, burn out.

I sit cross-legged. Staring at the keyboard in front of me. Tapping my pencil on my notebook. My white study lamp glares into the darkness of the room, illuminating only my workspace in the hope that, somehow, I can forget the rest of the world exists. If I can do that, then maybe I can find passion for my routine homework. All I need is a two-page analysis. Double-spaced. I've written more than that without blinking. I once wrote 350 words on an apostrophe, yet now my mind is completely and utterly blank. I can taste ash in my mouth. There is meaning in the words, but I can't bring myself to find it. I try. I promise I try, but nothing works. My head is in my hand, and I stare at the blank, white page. I type something, check a note, then backspace until the page is blank again. I refuse to go to bed until I finish my assignments, but I am unable to produce anything while the world moves around me. Footsteps run down the dorm hallway, my phone buzzing and buzzing and buzzing away until I shove it under my pillow to drown out the noise...or give in. Then I text, and watch a video, and scroll, before I finally chuck my phone away again. I'm back to square one. Cross-

legged. Staring. Unable to complete even the simplest assignments.

The worst part is I'm not even stressed. I wish I were stressed, because if I were, that electric pull would move my fingers, and that deeply entrenched fear of failure would kick in. Only that never happens, because the assignments are so mind-numbingly routine.

This all sounds depressing. Maybe it is depressing. It's so hard to fix something when nothing's technically wrong; even worse is to complain. What do you say, really? "Hey guys, have I ever told you that I get really good grades without ever trying, and sometimes that makes me feel like a pile of sludge?" It's obnoxious. It's absurd. I'm an electric fireplace. I glow so bright, emit so much warmth, but as soon as you leave the room, you turn a switch, and not even embers are left.

I admire that little girl in the dawn. The one who sat down and made a fire just because she wanted to. I long for her: her inspiration, her quiet pride. I know her fire is within me, I know I am capable of such things, but once again, my fingers fumble with the lighter's catch. Over and over it clicks.

Sometimes I can taste it, and I rinse out the ash in my mouth. In a creative workshop with my peers, I see their spark, all their dreams coming to life. I see their joy and hard work, and through them I see mine. After each session, I leave more inspired than when I arrived. It feels so good, so familiar, like that little girl in the dawn has taken her rag and washed away all the ash from my eyes, helped me see clearly in the early morning light. Now it is obvious: my favorite classes—the most important classes—are the ones that raise a challenge.

One rare syllabus day, I walk through the classroom door, sit

down, and realize that I am completely out of my depth. While the subject matter is familiar to me, it is not something that has been drilled into my bones. It isn't a subject I can sleepwalk through. When I so confidently take a quiz and receive a 50%, I am astounded to find out I am bad at this subject. More than that, with success so far away, I realize I want to be good at it. I am ecstatic. Here, I could learn something new. Here, I will fail if I don't try. Here, no one will let my mediocrity slide.

This is the fuel I need. All that newspaper, every twig, every branch—I want to put them between my teeth and chew. Consume them. Burn them. Glow. The fire in my chest is growing...I care again. My eyes are clear, the ashes wiped away, and inside lie the embers of passion. They've always been there, even when the fire was tempered and laid to rest, even when I stopped holding myself accountable to beat my own best. I realize now that since my brand of burnout was (and is) a suffering of mundanity, the cure is to take myself out of the mundane.

I spent so many hours dragging myself through the motions, waiting

for someone to notice that slowly, ever so slowly, I was burning out. Here was the thing, though: even if it had been noticed, I'm not sure anyone could have helped. Maybe I'd get sympathy, or a lecture about imposter syndrome. My professors might have been tougher on me if that was what I wanted, but it would have been a bandage, not a cure. All of that would have been external, and it couldn't change anything about what was happening within.

I have to be the one to find my spark. I have to ignite my passion. If I am not in an environment where I feel inspired, it is up to me to put myself in a place that will. I have to try new things. I have to go to new places. Most importantly, even when I think I might fail, even when things are hard, I can't shrink back scared. The easy way out gains me nothing, because if I take the easy way, I still lose. It's not my grades that are in danger; it's me. It's that little girl in the dawn, setting fires in mid-June, when she doesn't need warmth and when no one has told her what to do. I need to protect the little girl who burns, and I'll trade an A for her any day.

Talia Hincks is a genre-crashing, lindy-hopping, aikido-throwing adventurer. She likes to do a little bit of everything, but reading and writing have always held her heart. That's what brought her to Rider University, where she graduated with a BA in English and certificates in Management & Leadership. While there, she was the head fiction editor of *Venture Magazine*, president of the martial arts club, an intern at W. W. Norton & Company, and the Community Assistant for a whole floor of singing freshmen. Talia picks a motto for every year, and in 2025, she decided to "do it scared."

Original Song

Burning Through Burnout: A Collaborative Project Burning the Body

Kamanay Belcher | Rider University

When setting out to write this song, “Burning the body,” I fought with the question: Is burnout predominantly mental, physical, or both? While I was confident that burnout could result in some bodily effects, I wasn’t sure how those effects could be a result of something psychological. To answer this question, I turned to my own experiences.

While reflecting, I noticed that I will quickly develop a lack of care for myself, both physically and mentally, when experiencing burnout. I will skip doing things to care for my body, and even after that neglect causes negative effects on my health, I don’t have it in me to feel any real concern for my well-being.

Surprisingly, this wasn’t the end of the sequence of reactions that I found. Sure, some sort of mental experience caused a physical response, but I was surprised to find that the physical effects of burnout led to new mental consequences. Thus, I concluded that burnout is a progressive cycle of mental and physical ordeals that continue to build on each other. For instance, a lack of sleep could cause a chain reaction of exhaustion, a lack of focus, irritability, anxiety, skipping meals, low energy, and emotional detachment. Together, these symptoms create a different person out of me, erasing the one that I started out as. I aimed to represent this idea in the song’s final lines, noting that burnout is both “an ache in my body” and “consuming my soul.”

This conclusion also led to the title, “Burning the Body.” At first glance, it is meant to evoke the idea of a physical action affecting the body, while also referencing the idea of getting rid of a body as a means to destroy evidence. I found that burnout can operate in a similar way, erasing the traces of someone until they are completely gone.

Writing this song helped me understand how burnout has affected and may continue to affect both my body and mind. I hope that my song can do the same for any listeners, but especially students who may be going through similar experiences.

Scan Here To Listen!



Kamanay Belcher is currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in English at Rider University. In her spare time, she enjoys listening to music, making music, and watching TV. In addition to releasing songs, she also hopes to publish fiction novels in the near future. After graduation, she also plans to resume taking harp lessons, work on language learning, and spend more time with her friends and family. Until then, she can be found attending classes, studying for tests, or making videos for her YouTube and TikTok accounts.

Poetry

I live within the fringe

Kate Polson | Transylvania University

Within the fringe,
and never outside.
Never go with the flow,
just along for the ride.

Rigid placements
boxes to fill.
Wondering what could be
out this here window sill.

Finding a path
to suit my needs.
I'm so hard pressed
following their leads.

A curve, not a line.
Hard to wrap my mind
beyond what's defined
in this so-called grind.

Wrestle with myself.
People to see, places to go.
Would they understand
if I left with my bags in tow?

Kate Polson is a senior studying Education & Social Change at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. She also has minors in Philosophy and Creative Writing.

A Critical Lens on the “Male Gaze”

Sara Shaw | University of Utah

Introduction

In high school, I had the privilege of traveling alongside my mother to several European countries. During my time there, we learned the rich history of each country and went to some of the most established museums in the world. As I was walking through a gallery, I noticed how many of the paintings seemed to portray a woman's body being sexualized and illustrated lustfully. Eventually, as I got older, I saw statues that were created in honor of significant women in stories and folk tales, like the “Statue of Juliet” (Figure 6) and Molly Malone, only to see the metal tarnish on the women's breasts from the amount of tourists touching those areas repeatedly. This was different from the objectified women I saw in paintings, as these sculptures were not intended to be viewed lustfully, but were instead to show respect and homage to these women. These statues told a new story about how the “male gaze” and over-sexualization of women find their way to creep into female representation within the arts and become normalized socially. This was seen through the simple act of deliberately choosing to rub the statues, subjecting their new value to touching their breasts instead of recognizing their true stories and purpose.

This led me to use visual arts-based research concerning the male gaze. This includes paintings, statues, photographs, etc. Through my research, I'll examine how the male gaze creeps into everyday culture,

such as looking at the media or even seeing movie posters. I will also address wedding photographs in Chinese communities, the implications of these photos, and the different interpretations among the viewers. By examining these communities, I will provide nuanced ideas of how to interpret media and its correlation to how the “male gaze” is a multifaceted subject. Overall, I plan to discuss the nuance in what is empowering and what is deemed as the “male gaze,” and how it depends on the lens through which you are looking with as one of the themes of this work. The main focus of this research is to discuss the “male gaze,” where one may see or interpret it, the harmful standards and expectations it sets for women how objectifying media must be held accountable instead of women, and how the male gaze impacts us socially.

Literature review

The male gaze is defined as the sexualization and objectification of women throughout the media, demonstrating a power imbalance between men and women (Vanbuskirk, 2024, para. 4). Over time, it has become a more prominent subject in current media, and when analyzing movies, advertisements, etc., as there has been a rise in conversations about the adverse effects of the male gaze, along with critical commentary. Kelly Oliver, a feminist philosopher and scholar, discusses how the male gaze still maintains relevance in modern-day media. This is seen as women are closely examined based on how they appear. Eventually,

this leads to the objectification of oneself, which ultimately makes a woman believe her values lie in appearances, which only reinforces harmful patriarchal views (Oliver, 2017, pp. 451–455).

Oliver (2017) states, “There is no place for identity with feminine activity. In this world all agents and identity are male and all objects to be desired are female” (p. 451), meaning the male gaze is used to objectify and define female identities. This correlates with the scholars Dziwa, Postma, and Combrink's (2020) findings. This is seen as Oliver and Dziwa et al. focus on how patriarchal values, such as the male gaze, shape female identity. Furthermore, Dziwa et al. discuss the culture in Zimbabwe and how the male gaze or patriarchal views impact the roles in which women play socially, and how it strips them of their independence. Through this discussion, there is also an emphasis on creating art that gives women their power back (Dziwa et al. 2020, pp. e1–e9).

This discourse also opens doors to what is and isn't the male gaze. This can be found from the anthropologist Renyou Hou (2022), who focuses on Chinese society, as he discusses whether bridal photos in Chinese rural communities are seen as a means of men holding power in how they choose to gaze at their brides, or whether the women hold the power in their choice of expression. Essentially, this article highlights the nuance in visual media and how it often relies on personal interpretation (Hou, 2022).

This piece, in turn, corresponds to researcher Ewa Glapka (2018), who uses interviews to examine how women experience the male gaze, similarly to Hou's research in personal accounts. The findings of this research are that many women feel the need to cover up as a means not to attract unwanted attention. Overall, these articles have themes

of the male gaze, personal agency, and current cultures. These themes can be approached properly through arts-based research, as Egerton (2015) explains in his review of Patricia Leavy's book, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*. Egerton explains Leavy's own discourse as she discusses how this form of research demands more engagement from audiences.

Methodology

Visual methodology is significant in that it tells a story to a viewer through the use of visual media, allowing the viewer to interpret the given media. This allows room for interpretation and critical thinking. In a review essay of Patricia Leavy's work "Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice," Egerton (2015) discusses Leavy's discoveries and how she highlights that Arts-Based Research allows an audience to be more "engaged" when asking questions and delving into research (p. 72). This is important, especially in my use of visual research, because, for my audience to understand the male gaze, they also have to view the provided visual arts through their lens. In other words, my use of visual art-based research allows my audience to also engage in critical analysis. In the article, "A Beginner's Guide to Visual Analysis: What Are You Looking At?" visual analysis is defined as "the foundation of any art historical writing and makes up the backbone of art history" (Luxton, 2020, para 1). This is also essential in my research as it helps us understand the history of art and also gives us insights into how the male gaze had a prevalence before today. While the articles I rely on are diverse in discussion, they provide unique lived perspectives from personal beliefs and cultural influences to how media creeps into social aspects of everyday life. The research I examine and my methodology take into consideration a grand scope of ways the male gaze is seen, from a

mass scale to smaller communities to individuals. Overall, when examining the scale of the male gaze, this lends insights into how it is formed by historical patriarchal views, and that recognizing the male gaze is one step forward in dismantling the harm it causes.

Male Gaze in Movie Posters

One of the areas where the culture of the "male gaze" runs rampant is in the use of movie posters. An example where this is seen is a poster from the film *Click* (Figure 1), which is composed to draw the viewer to the woman's breasts. This is seen with the words "slo-mo," as they are used as a focal point to draw one's eyes there. This is dehumanizing as it reduces the woman to her breasts. This poster intends to reduce this woman to her sex appeal, with the primary focus being on her body. We don't see the woman's full face; this is also a form of reducing the woman and objectifying her body. In addition, a person is holding a remote that is essentially used as a means to control the image of the woman. This has further implications that this woman does not have her own autonomy, and her purpose lies in her ability to please a male viewer (*Click*, 2006). Oliver (2017) highlights the overt sexualization within movies themselves, stating, "The fluidity between filmic poses and still poses from other forms of media and popular culture work together to create not only the star persona available for consumption but also the looks and poses that define what it means to be sexy for our cultural moment" (p. 453). She goes on to claim that these poses become indicative of what is desirable, therefore shaping women's perceptions of themselves and others.

The female body is not intrinsically sexual; however, it's in the way a person captures a woman and in what lens they are looking at that shifts the narrative of that image.



Fig 1. *Click*

This poster leaves little room to suggest the intent of the creators. This is the foremost issue. The male gaze not only makes sexual suggestions regarding a woman's appearance and figure, but it ultimately sends a message that the value of women stems from appearances and that they are viewed purely for sex appeal. Vanbuskirk (2024) also states that the male gaze makes it so women's "Agency is reduced to that of an erotic or supporting object, with their value as a female form (and person) reduced to how it appeals to the male viewer." This means that visual media such as posters can be used as a means to "reduce" women, whether intentionally or not, and the implications socially are purely negative, as it sheds a negative limelight on women.

On the movie poster for *Dirty Grandpa* (Figure 2), we see a woman bending over, with two men observing her. One is an old man who has this appeased expression on his face as he overtly stares at her bottom. The other man has a more concerned expression as he holds a gas pump that is used as a phallic symbol. Like the previously discussed images, we see that the woman is reduced to her body as we don't see her face, but only the bottom half of her body. The men, however, are humanized in the fact that they are fully represented through the poster; the use of their faces humanizes



Fig 2. *Dirty Grandpa*

these characters, whereas the woman is seen as a supporting objects. This reinforces the idea that a woman is seen as a sexual object, suggesting that her value lies in appeasing a man (*Dirty Grandpa*, 2016). As stated earlier, how we portray women in the media directly impacts us socially and how we view women.

This can be explicitly seen in research about the male gaze found within Zimbabwean culture. Authors Dziwa, Postma, and Combrink (2020) discuss artist Goffman circa 1987 and state that there is a “clear dichotomy in the portrayal of men and women in advertisements where their representations confirm culturally constructed and essentialist gender roles” (p. e2). In other words, artists in Zimbabwe are found to depict clear patriarchal roles, which further reinforce harmful ideas and standards for women. This correlates to the *Click* and *Dirty Grandpa* movie posters in that patriarchal roles, while found throughout visual media across cultures, also encourage looking at women through an objectified lens, which only reinforces harmful patriarchal views, such as reducing women to sexual objects. In doing

so, women face larger real-world implications in how they are treated and viewed, as the media we consume trickles into our everyday culture and how we regard one another. Dziwa et al. discuss the harms of patriarchal themes being pushed



Fig. 3: Masimba Hwati. *Urban Totems 6*.

through visual media. These scholars make note of Masimba Hwati’s art, in which he captures men wearing glasses that reflect culturally relevant matters, such as brands, social media platforms, etc. (Figure 3). While this image is not a reflection of women being overly sexualized, it is indicative of men’s dominance not only in art but culturally as well. Dziwa et al. (2020) state that the forward gaze indicates dominance, while the glasses indicate that this man can see past “hegemonic brands as desirable” and simultaneously that “men are presumed to be the bearers of standard in a hegemonic popular culture.” (p. 4) This is a strong example of how Hwati’s art is not only exempt from promoting the male gaze, but the male gaze gives men power only as a means to diminish women by allowing men to be the “bearers” of standards and reinforcing the patriarchy.

The Male Gaze Outside of Modern Media

Not all examples of the male gaze are found in contemporary art and media. For example, Hou Renyou (2022) discusses the culture and views behind bridal gown photography within contemporary rural China and expands on the idea of subjectivity in interpreting art and media (Figure 4). Hou discusses how the groom gazes at the bride can



Fig 4. *Bridal Gown Photography*

have two very different interpretations in terms of power display. According to some, the groom gazing down at his bride is a display of power from the man, as a woman exists to be glanced upon. Yet, Lee Yuying, a bride in Huo’s study, said that “being gazed at’ is not always associated with a passive situation; on the contrary, it could be seen as experiencing the ‘power of display’ (p. 411).

In another example from the art world, the painting “Princess of Talleyrand” (1804) (Figure 5) by Francois Gérard shows a beautiful woman looking off into the distance. Upon



Fig. 5 “Princess of Talleyrand”

first glance, nothing seems overtly sexual; there is no nude woman and no heavy sexual undertones. However, the male gaze doesn't necessarily have to be overt for it to still exist within visual media. Arguably, the male gaze is found simply by the woman gazing off to the side. The implications of her gaze tell us a whole story. When a portrait looks directly at a viewer, it gives the sense that the viewer is also being gazed upon; in a way, it sets a sort of dominant characteristic when a portrait can also stare at the viewer. In this image, the woman is almost dismissive; instead, the audience holds the power in gazing at her. In other words, she is posed ready to be subjected to an audience and their lens, which sets a precedent that there is a sense of control from the audience, leaving her powerless (Lear, 2017).

This is essentially what the male gaze is. It's taking away the power that a woman holds and stripping her only to the pleasure of the male viewer, which in the act is dehumanizing. This is important in understanding, as even the most overt display of objectification doesn't mean that visual media is exempt from being considered a part of the "male gaze." It is also crucial to understand who holds a sense of power and authority.



Fig. 6 "Statue of Juliet"

Despite there being nuance in how we view art and media, some visual forms are more overt in the message that they send. This is seen with the "Statue of Juliet" as her breasts have been rubbed to the point that the

metal is gold. The "Statue of Juliet" is similar to "Princess of Talleyrand" in that both pieces give power to the viewer themselves, leaving their autonomy in the hands of their audience. While many rub "The Statue of Juliet" for good luck, it eventually left her too damaged (Sheffer, 2014, para 1-3). It can also be seen as problematic in which areas tourists choose to touch. In Figure 6, we see a man fondling Juliet's breasts while taking a selfie. It can be argued that this is seen as derogatory in how the focus of Juliet is on her breasts. This sends the message that Juliet's purpose now lies in her breasts being touched and subjects her value to her body. While many might not think about the underlying implications of where we touch and rub statues, it still tells us socially where we draw value in a woman's appearance, and how simply rubbing a statue's breast implies that its purpose is to be touched, highlighting the loss of autonomy.

When discussing the objectification of women's bodies, it's also important to highlight that women are not at fault for the over-sexualization of their bodies. Glapka's (2018) shares Kamo's story. Kamo is a rape survivor who grew up in a culture that pushed ideas of how gender based violence lies at the fault of women and the way they dress (p. 94). Her experiences, though, have taught her otherwise as she discusses the constant attacks of men's oversexualized comments. Glapka (2018) states that she started "shifting causality from herself upon men, Kamo leaves the position of moral accountability" (Glapka, p. 96). In other words, when approaching the discussion of the Juliet statue being subjected to the sexualization of tourists, it's also essential to discuss that the problem is not in how Juliet is portrayed but in how people react and choose to approach a portrayal of a woman character and her figure. In other words, those who objectify

women should be held accountable for the over-sexualization of women.

Conclusion

The male gaze finds its way to creep into almost every art form, but ultimately, it can be recognized. It's essential to be able to define and understand how even little details in the visual arts can be used as a means to diminish women. Especially in current media such as movie posters, where even the act of leaving a woman faceless creates a whole narrative that her value is in her body. Recognizing the problem of objectifying women in posters creates room for discussion in creating media that humanizes women. It's also important to recognize how acts that seem as small as rubbing a statue can have large implications on how we view women. And that even if the intention of rubbing a statue isn't to spread a negative message about women, it's the impact of seeing that a portrayal of women is now valued by tourists, touching her body. The consequences, whether intentional or not, leave a mark on women and girls as they navigate the world, seeing how women are treated in the media and how they are represented within art. The "Statue of Juliet" remains a reminder of how many women and girls carry the burden of knowing that art remains an indicator of how they are viewed socially today, leading to a sense of burnout, in overcoming the consequences of the male gaze today.

While, in some instances, the lens we use to interpret an image or art is our own, it also matters to understand the intent of the artist and what the potential interpretations and implications of a photo tell us about society and what has been normalized, especially as recognition is the first step towards change. When we recognize a problem, we can create solutions, and to do so, we must address the harms of the male gaze and the impact it has on women.

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Sara Shaw is a student at the University of Utah studying Writing & Rhetoric. Her academic interests focus on how rhetoric can be utilized to stress complex topics and advocate for others. This work was created considering topics about “burnout” and analyzing how art mediums can convey powerful messages. In future projects, she hopes to continue to expand on these ideas.

Red Panda Power: A Feminist Analysis of Domee Shi's *Turning Red*

Amanda J. Spooner | Curry College

Reflective Statement

Approval can be a powerful, driving force for many of our life's decisions. I buried myself in school-work and clubs when I was in high school because I wanted the approval of a group of people I admired. Most of my time was spent focusing on my work, or talking about it. It made me feel like a chameleon: taking on the colors of the people closest to me so I wouldn't stick out as much as I did. My life became school, and that led me to distance myself from the true friends I had, as well as from my family. I pushed myself harder and harder hoping that my efforts would give me the approval I sought, but it completely depleted any shred of happiness I once held. I was exhausted, and I felt like I was floating through life. I was burnt out. The clique I latched onto was the one that topped the class ranks with their near-perfect grade point averages. These people thrived in their academics, and strived to be engineers or scientists. Being surrounded by them made me believe I wanted that for myself too. My decision to pursue film and media studies in college was the first thing I had done for myself in a long time, and it made me realize I was much happier when I stopped pretending to be like the people that expected so much from me.

In the 2002 film *Turning Red*, main character Meilin "Mei" Lee searches for similar approval; not from friends or mentors, but from her mother. School consumes her life

and being, as she does everything her mother and family want her to. When Mei discovers she has an 'inner red panda,' this discovery serves as her ticket to the independence she craves after years of living out others' expectations. Her family wants to subdue that spirit, not letting her stray far from the life they've made for her. Mei's ultimate choice to keep the red panda is her first step toward paving her own path to follow. A relentless pursuit of approval may sound satisfying to some, but in Mei's own words: "if you take it too far, well, you might forget to honor yourself."

Introduction

Disney and Pixar are widely considered to be pioneers within the animation industry, with a heavy focus on adolescent girl-centered narratives. Critics have long observed limited and problematic representations of girlhood since the release of *Snow White* (Hand, 1937), *Cinderella* (Jackson et al., 1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959). Dawn Elizabeth England, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek (2011) analyzed how many 'masculine' and 'feminine' stereotypical characteristics Disney princesses and princes exhibited in their storylines, finding that while princes possessed traits from both categories, the princesses only had traits labeled as 'feminine.' They stated in their research that "gender role portrayals in the [Disney] films may influence children's beliefs and ideas about gender, social behaviors, and norms" (England et al., 556). Amy M. Davis (2011)

discussed 'beauty' being equated to 'goodness' in Disney princess films, and explained how attractiveness served as both a measure for how likeable a female character was as well as whether or not the male characters would get any fulfillment out of her presence.

In recent years, Pixar has been criticized for its misogynistic workplace environment because of sexual harassment allegations against former chief creative officer and co-founder John Lasseter. Since Lasseter's departure from Pixar, the animation studio has seen a shift in on-screen female representation (Gabriela Sá et al., 2023). Gabriela Sá (2023) found that women looking to enter the animation industry are often discouraged for the following reasons: "1) a culture of homophily that prevents women from feeling a sense of belonging, 2) women being valued less than their male counterparts and 3) women being perceived as lacking ambition" (Gabriela Sá et al., 2023, pp. 3-4). While female workers in the industry do exist, female storytellers and female-led productions are exceedingly rare. There may be female characters on screen, but these characters are largely told through the lens of a male point of view — that is, girlhood psychology sluices through male storytelling tropes. Domee Shi's *Turning Red* (2022) is a departure from the established Disney-Pixar tradition, providing an example of a successful female-led and female-written story. Shi is one of two female feature-length directors to be credited on a Pixar project in the studio's history along with Brenda Chapman, the co-director for *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman, 2012). Sá adds that 47.17% of *Turning Red*'s creative team are women, representing Pixar's highest female to male workplace ratio, with many females holding leadership positions such as director, writer, and producer (Gabriela Sá et al., 2023, p. 5).

Turning Red describes Mei Lee's transition to womanhood through a series of confrontations with her mother, Ming, her grandmother, and her 'aunties.'

Analysis

In the film, young girl Mei transforms into a red panda whenever she feels intense emotion. At the core of *Turning Red* is the complex intergenerational conflict presented through the Lees, a Chinese-Canadian immigrant family. Mei's unique feminine power is presented as part of her Chinese identity. Xiongya Gao (2003) details a centuries-long history of women's oppression in China, using the symbolism behind Yin and Yang to show the discriminatory treatment: "In the Chinese language, the Yin, literally meaning 'overcast' or 'shade' is often used to refer to the female...and the Yang, literally meaning 'the sun' and figuratively referring to the male, standing for all things bright, open, overt, warm, strong and active" (p. 115). Yin and Yang represent a balance between two forms, and interpreting females as the darker half of males restricts women's personhood rights.

Mei's fight for her autonomy and personhood is at the core of *Turning Red*'s transnational story. Hazal Bayar (2022) discusses *Turning Red*'s challenge of filial piety, a Confucian term that "requires children to fulfill [a] parent's practical and financial/material needs and look after a parent's emotional well-being" (Bayar, 2022, p. 4). How Mei's choices are shaped by her mother are detailed in Domee Shi's film. As the story of *Turning Red* unfolds, Mei learns an ancestor was gifted the power of the red panda to help defend her village. This 'red panda power' activates in girlhood or womanhood during times of stress. Mei inherits this power in her adolescence and uses it to live according to her own aspirations. This fluctuating relationship Mei has with her mother is pivotal

to both of their growth as individuals, just like the other female-directed Disney and Pixar collaboration *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman, 2012).

Turning Red sets itself apart from other animated products in its willingness to advocate a sex-positive identity for girls. Domee Shi states that *Turning Red* is "inspired by [her] own life growing up in Toronto and being the only child of [her] over-protective mom and dad" (*Embrace the Panda*, 2022, 0:15:58 – 0:16:10). To further develop themes of girlhood empowerment, production designer Rona Liu expressed that "it was important to design [Mei] the way that [the women working on the film] saw [themselves]" (*Embrace the Panda*, 2022, 0:24:46–0:20:58). The women designers chose to include facial features often omitted from Disney and Pixar female leads, such as a rounded face, thick ankles, and patchy eyebrows (0:24:46–0:20:58). This design makes Mei appear as any adolescent girl would, highlighting her imperfections to help the audience identify with Mei's ordinariness. Rui Chen and Yi Liu distributed a survey to a *Turning Red* screening pool with members who "indicated that they saw themselves in [Mei], so it was very easy to empathize with the characters in the film, and thus, resonate with them" (Chen & Liu, 2023, p. 14). Shi crafts Mei's appearance to contrast with Disney's legacy of misrepresenting girlhood, who are often sexualized with little subjectivity. The female creative team behind *Turning Red* strives to utilize Mei's character to push back against limited roles assigned to girls in Disney films.

Domee Shi's animated camera lens emphasizes girlhood empowerment when Mei first wakes up as a red panda. Mei's struggles to accept her red panda power are connected to experiencing her first period—a remarkable narrative invention for a Disney-Pixar collaboration. Researchers Gabriele Sá, Paula Tavares,

and Heitor Alvelos (2023) examining the number of female credits they could count in Pixar's entire animated feature catalog, placed *Turning Red* on a pedestal, "recognizing how [director Domee Shi's] work is defying the status quo from within a male-dominated industry in general, and studio in particular" (Sá et al. 2-3). Rui Chen and Yi Liu (2023) found that American media featuring Chinese cultures perform worse with Chinese audiences, although "*Turning Red* is an exception, as it is the only work whose score on Douban is higher than that on IMDb," meaning it performed better with audiences in China than it did in America (Chen & Liu 2). McKenzie Scrine, founder of The Women's Direction, praised *Turning Red* as a missing piece in the industry, stating that "we have finally gotten a film that reflects the type of stories that people who campaign for equality in the industry have been asking for." (Scrine, 2022). Scrine calls the story "a complete and relatable tale of growing up as a thirteen-year-old girl," saying that "many adults will find themselves physically responding to many of the aspects of the story by laughing and cringing like myself" (Scrine, 2022). Jessie Lab of Flixist emphasized *Turning Red* as being "infinitely charming and sweet, carrying Pixar's standard excellent animation in an authentic and sweet package that makes me want to rewatch it again and again" (Lab, 2022). Lab also expressed frustration with *Turning Red* being released straight to Disney+ "without giving it the chance to succeed in theaters" (Lab 2022). As of early 2024, *Turning Red* had a limited theatrical release alongside other animated films released straight to Disney+, including *Soul* (Docter, 2020) and *Luca* (Cassara, 2021).

The scene where Mei first discovers her red panda power is staged by Mei waking up, walking into the bathroom, and seeing that she has transformed into another being alto-

gether. Ming, her mother, even asks her if everything is alright, and once she hears Mei's answer, Ming knows that her daughter got her period and scrambles to find pads. As Mei tries to ward her mother off—ashamed and embarrassed—Mei yells at her mother to leave her alone. This is a significant turning point for Mei as she has always followed her mother without question and red panda power marks a willingness to challenge her mother's commands. When her mother barges into the bathroom, Shi's *mise-en-scène* captures Ming and Mei's confrontation through a conflict of volume in the frame. Mei hides behind the comfort of the shower curtain, scrunched up so that she sticks to the wall and corner, occupying very little space given she is enlarged as a huge panda. Ming occupies most of the space in the animated frame and crosses into Mei's space by reaching for the curtain to expose her daughter. Even though Mei is giant compared to her mother, she still feels small in this moment. Shi's placement suggests that Ming has all the power and invades Mei's privacy as an expression of her motherly authority. Most of Disney's and Pixar's "girlhood projects" depict a loving, affectionate, and selfless mother. *Turning Red* illustrates a willingness to explore disagreements between mother and daughter as Mei is transitioning to womanhood.

Shi's camera angles explain how Mei practices her red panda power when disobeying her mother's order to not attend the 4*Town concert. Mei and her friends are huge fans of the boyband 4*Town, and are shown throughout the film singing along to their music as a means of comfort and strength. Mei's attendance at the concert follows a fight with her family, where Ming, her father, grandmother, and four 'aunties', all gather to perform a ritual to stop Mei from activating her red panda power. The scene depicts the family disempowering Mei, discouraging her fem-

inine power. During the concert, Ming herself transforms into a red panda, stomping toward the arena with her red panda eyes piercing through the concert hall calling out "Mei, Mei"—a nickname assigned to Mei during childhood. As Ming crashes the concert, crushing the vibrant 4*Town sign in her panda paw, Mei realizes she has no choice but to confront her mother. She must convince her mother that she is old enough to make her own choices. In this scene, Shi describes how red panda power varies by generation or the approval of feminine power changes from one generation to the next. Ming is a enormous, beast-like form of the red panda, with sluggish movements and pace while Mei is a much smaller and more agile form. The animated camera angle accounts for the difference, enlarging Ming and diminishing Mei. A high-angle animated shot looms over Mei from Ming's point of view while a low-angle shot glances up at Ming from Mei's point of view. Ming has all the power in this sequence, yet Mei makes it clear that she intends to use her feminine power regardless of her mother's approval.

The concert scene sets the stage for Mei's determination to confront her mother. The scene continues with Mei using her smaller stature to her advantage as her agility allows her to dodge the slow movements of her larger mother in panda form. The generational struggle is also present in how each of them chooses to use their red panda power. Mei has fully embraced her autonomy at this point in the film, which the red panda power enables, demonstrating her willingness to challenge her mother. Her stance challenges the Confucian ideal of filial piety that demands children fulfill family desires before their own. Mei's grandmother as well as the four aunties only decide to free their red panda power when Ming is in trouble—cementing Shi's symbolism that red panda power is a source of strength for women. Ming,

possessed by a fitful rage, believes that removing her daughter from the concert protects Mei from tracing her attraction to the four boys in 4*Town. While Mei uses her panda power in her daily life, the core conflict in this film revolves around differences in how generations grant or deny a girl's ability to make her own decisions. Thus, Shi's film depicts Mei's struggle for autonomy through her transition from girlhood to womanhood, a struggle experienced from one generation to the next. Mei confronts obstacles, just as her mother did. When Ming's choice of husband was disapproved of by her own mother, she went through a similar journey to Mei in order to pursue her own interests instead of her family's. Both Mei and Ming sought to claim personhood rights by doing something for themselves instead of their mother.

Mei's devotion to her mother—her embrace of filial piety—is showcased and confronted as she comes home from school and starts on her algebra homework. Above Mei's desk reads "STUDY WORK LISTEN," a motto her mother reinforces through strictures on Mei's behavior. In this scene, Mei doodles a picture of the corner store clerk Devon, whom her friends all think is cute even though Mei initially claims she doesn't see what they find attractive in him. As she keeps drawing, her attention drifts to Devon. Her desire gnaws away at her as she suddenly stands up, facing her bedroom door to directly confront the audience directly. This pivotal moment stresses how Shi wants the audience to identify with the shame and embarrassment assigned to feminine sexual desire. The *mise-en-scène* gives us a full view of Mei's bedroom, placed in the same location her mother would stand had she opened Mei's door. Thus, momentarily the audience takes on the role of the restrictive and judgmental mother. She sits and stares at the audience for a beat, before grabbing the notebook

and rolling under her bed to continue drawing the cute corner store clerk. By going under the bed, Mei is giving herself some level of privacy—yet Shi supplies the audience with access to Mei's intimate thoughts and feelings. This scene displays Mei openly and publicly exploring sexuality, an act that is not generally supported in American society.

Themes of girlhood sexuality are unheard of in the Disney-Pixar animated catalog. *Turning Red's* brave storytelling dares to showcase the rollercoaster of a young girl discovering sexual attraction during puberty. This led to the film being met with a barrage of poor reviews from parents concerned about the content their children were consuming. Mihaela Mihailova (2022) of *Eat Drink Films* bashed the negative reviews, stating that “if drawing one's crush as a merman or referencing menstruation through a poetic euphemism is too indecent for American parents, there may be little hope for improvement in this country's questionable sex ed record.” Mihailova continues her criticism of the reviews by highlighting that “the parental backlash against *Turning Red* says more about the persistence of narrow-minded and sexist attitudes towards girlhood than it does about Pixar's alleged moral degeneracy,” concluding that “it's no wonder that, in this context, an animated film which dares tell girls to embrace and treasure who they are, teen hormones and all, seems a step too far” (Mihailova, 2022). Sammie Purcell (2022) of *Rough Draft Atlanta* questions the stigma coming with the wave of negative reviews bashing *Turning Red's* main character drooling over the corner-shop clerk: “those moments are accepted as a general marker of maturity and growing up for boys, as they should be—but why are we still hemming and hawing over them when it comes to girls?” (Purcell, 2022). Purcell doubles down on the themes, emphasizing that “this sort

of self-discovery is important at a young age, and Mei's desperation to hide this part of herself from her mother in particular is exactly what exacerbates the stresses between them” (Purcell 2022).

Similar to Ming seeking control of Mei, these negative reviews want to control the population of young girls watching these films Disney and Pixar produce. Female sexuality is a long-observed topic of fear amongst older generations, and it's widely frowned upon to explore in a girl's adolescence. Media allows for the exchange of information, and most of Disney's animated feature-length catalog emphasizes the female's desire to wait for love and marry to make the man happy. Negative reviews of *Turning Red* support those messages more because they avoid the topic of female sexuality. They don't want the younger generations of girls learning that there are alternate paths because that makes the older generations lose the control they desire. As *Turning Red* emphasizes through its generational rift among the women in the Lee family, one of the groups forcing these beliefs onto adolescents are the females that came before them.

This scene in *Turning Red* is crucial to Mei's development, and director Domee Shi deliberately chooses to have Mei confront the audience in this life-changing awkward moment. Mei rises from her desk chair, laser-focused on the audience; she doesn't blink as she stares, eyes wide, at the audience ascribed the viewpoint of condemnation. Shi calculates Mei's movements and anticipates the audience's inevitable negative reaction to the moment Mei discovers that she craves knowledge of herself she never knew she could obtain. The audience is forced to uphold stances that restrict and demean girlhood sexuality, just as all of the negative reviews suggest.

In the bamboo grove scene short-

ly after the arena battle between mother and daughter, all the females—grandma, aunties, Ming, and Mei—find themselves in a mystical forest. The bright white coloring and lighting gives a feeling of heavenly imagery and wonder to the hideaway exclusive to Lee women possessing red panda power. Mei finds herself alone in this grove at first, but soon finds a younger version of her mother crying. To fix unresolved intergenerational issues, the grove rewinds time so that Ming is now an adolescent girl—the same age as her daughter Mei. In this moment, the present power dynamic between these two reverses. An animated low-angle shot shows Mei looking down at her mother, standing above her reaching out to her in a comforting gesture, while a high-angle shot displays Ming sobbing on her knees looking up at her daughter. The *mise-en-scene* in the animated frame dramatically shifts from the earlier bathroom scene. There is no imbalanced space between these two, showing that they've grown considerably since the beginning of the film: they are centered in frame. The choice to show Ming as a red-haired adolescent female transforms her to the age of Mei; thus, reinforcing how every girl struggles to identify and accept the power within themselves. When Mei helps her mother Ming stand up, Shi aligns the concerns of Mei's experience with girlhood with her mother's. Mei leads her through the heavenly grove, showing that Ming is now the one who needs guidance—not her daughter.

By showing Ming in a vulnerable adolescent state, Mei learns that her struggles are the same as her mother's. A mother character previously shown to be overbearing and authoritative has been humanized through the reinforcement of intergenerational conflict in the Lee family. Grandma forced Ming to repress her red panda power, and now Ming has been trying to do the same to her daughter Mei. Ming's insecure

rity stems from her decision to marry Jin—Mei's father—and her own mother's disapproval of their union. She too stood up to her mother's strict wishes and decided to embrace her own path separate from the one laid out for her. Ming is vocal about how disappointed her own mother is, and how she can't manage to do anything right. The only time when Ming reveals the start of these insecurities is not when she's the empowered red panda like her daughter, but rather when she's a scared, lonely, adolescent girl. Meeting up with grandma and the aunts in the center of the grove, each female shares the same hair color: symbolically red. This shared hair color furthers the motif of balance in this moment, signifying that each female in this family is equal. It also represents the acceptance of the red panda power. As the older women go through the portal at the center, relinquishing their panda power, they lose that red color. Mei remains the only female in the family with red hair, as she has chosen to keep her panda while the others have not. Before Ming leaves the scene, she calls out to Mei one last time, asking her to give up the power. Mei walks up to her mother, the two touching hands from different sides—Mei in the mystical bamboo forest and her mother in the gateway back to the contemporary world—and the animated camera places them in the center, once again occupying the same space close together. Even though Ming does not agree with Mei's decision, she supports her daughter. Mei's constant struggle for autonomy gives way in this moment. She has made her choice to keep the red panda and the feminine empowerment that comes with it, giving her the freedom she has fought for throughout the story.

Conclusion

Domee Shi's *Turning Red* presents a discourse on female empowerment by narrating Mei's transition from

girlhood to womanhood. The narrative invests in the mother-daughter relationship to explain how every generation of womanhood needs to discover their inner 'red panda power.' The initial red panda scene presents a unique approach to an adolescent girl's first period, an impressive inclusion for a Disney-Pixar project. The animated *mise-en-scène* suggests a mother-daughter power imbalance. During the 4th Town concert scene, the intergenerational conflict is depicted through the Ming-Mei red panda confrontation, visually demonstrating the power imbalance between parent and child, and how that inequity only increases Mei's desire for autonomy. Having Mei directly address the fourth wall, confronting the spectator's gaze, highlights her lack of privacy and the social expectations placed on girlhood. In the bamboo forest, Mei relates to and empathizes with her mother's adolescent struggles, thus reinforcing the intergenerational conflict women confront in the Lee family. A tussle that brings the mother-daughter relationship closer through their shared struggle to accept feminine power. *Turning Red* reflects how girlhood continuously confronts limitations of bodily autonomy and female subjectivity. Deviating from the 'perfect woman' appearance of many Disney and Pixar films, Mei's character design pushes back against one of the most prolific female stereotypes in the animation industry—the princess figure. Mei is more comfortable with who she is, and she recognizes that red panda power gives her the opportunity to speak her mind and pursue her desires.

Western society places a lot of pressure on young girls to follow a template, usually shown to them by their parents and peers. Kids craving acceptance do just about anything to make sure they get a taste. Mei wants her mom to accept her for who she is, so she becomes the person Ming wants her to be. The same

happens to young girls in school, as they search out cliques and contort their personalities and appearances to match that of the crowd they want to earn the acceptance of. Every young girl struggles with this; I certainly did. As girls age and they fly through school, maybe college, and start getting their first jobs, they realize that those expectations of them are largely the same. This is an exhaustive cycle that many girls feel trapped in, having no choice but to succumb to the wishes of others while ignoring their own. *Turning Red* has several messages it wants to pass down to young girls across the world, but one stands above them all. There are going to be people who want girls to stay between the lines they've drawn for them, but girls can create their own path with the explosive, untamed beauty of red panda power.

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The Pressure Within: How Self-Expectations Fueled My Burnout

Eh Shee Wah | University of Buffalo

Introduction: The Pressure Within

College can be exhilarating, but it can also be exhausting. For many students, the excitement of new opportunities comes with a hidden cost: burnout. In fact, more than half of college students experience academic burnout due to various factors such as issues with time management, pressure from family members, overworking themselves, and mental issues (Liu et al., 2023). Burnout is defined as the “exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Even so, burnout is not always triggered by these external forces; it often stems from the high standards we students set for ourselves. For first-generation students like me, we have expectations often tied to our families and honoring their sacrifices. This paper explores how the culture of comparison and self-imposed pressure fueled my own burnout, how I navigated a family crisis, and what I have learned about the true meaning of self-care and sustainable success.

The Culture of Comparison

On today’s social media platforms, comparison has become a key driver of burnout. Comparison, defined as “an examination of two or more items to establish similarities and dissimilarities,” fuels a culture in which we constantly measure ourselves against others (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Platforms such as LinkedIn allow students to

showcase internships, job offers, and accomplishments, which cause peers to question whether they are doing enough (Gottfried, 2024). This often triggers the feeling of being “behind,” despite the fact that everyone moves at their own pace. Instagram and similar apps can amplify this feeling by presenting idealized images of lifestyle, appearance, and personal milestones. Constant exposure to idealized images and accomplishments can lead to a sense of distorted reality.

I found myself susceptible to this pressure. Initially, my comparisons were mostly external. I often found myself measuring my accomplishments against my peers’ accomplishments. This pushed me to accelerate my studies, resulting in me graduating from college a semester earlier than I originally intended. Finishing early might seem like an achievement to some, but for me, it meant jumping headfirst into the daunting task of finding a job and beginning to think about graduate school earlier than I had intended, in order to validate the time and effort I had invested.

However, over time, these external comparisons shifted inward. I began competing with a version of myself that existed before COVID; a student who could easily excel without much effort. When high school moved online during the COVID-19 pandemic, the environment around me changed completely. Home was not a place for learning; it lacked the routine and focused environment that in-person classes provided. Due

to that shift, stepping into college afterward felt even more overwhelming, especially when coursework required greater independence and self-direction than I was used to. In high school, teachers gave detailed instructions and clear expectations for every assignment, making it easier to know exactly what was required to succeed. In college, however, learning is often self-directed and requires critical thinking. This felt overwhelming compared to the earlier system I was accustomed to. The difference between these two experiences made my self-comparing mindset more painful. Instead of inspiring growth, comparing my academic experiences only fueled my burnout because I tend to hold myself to a standard that no longer exists or fits my current life.

Carrying the Weight of Expectations

Much of my burnout has stemmed from keeping up with the standards I have set for myself. Pushing myself to meet every deadline, saying yes to opportunities, and taking on responsibilities without making time for myself. I often feel that the word “no” closes the door on chances that might propel me forward and that not being constantly productive means I am falling behind. Over time, I stopped viewing my milestones and accomplishments as victories. They became the bare minimum, a part of what I had to do to keep up with the standards I had set. As a first-generation immigrant, this pressure runs even deeper. I carry the weight of my parents’ sacrifices, believing that if I am not excelling in everything I do, I am not honoring the sacrifices they made when they left everything behind to start over in a new country.

As I grew into my own person, I viewed my hard work and perseverance as forms of respect to my parents. The sacrifice my parents made—arriving in a new country

with nothing but \$200—became the foundation of my motivation. My mom, in particular, did not grow up with the same academic privileges or opportunities that I have. Witnessing how much she wanted for me, what she never had, pushed me to work even harder. My drive to succeed was initially rooted in love and gratitude, but over time, I began to equate achievement with worthiness. Rest felt like a luxury I did not deserve and a pause that would only push me back. That sense of responsibility intensified when my family faced an unexpected hardship.

When I was 17, my dad suffered a massive stroke, causing my life to shift. I suddenly had responsibilities I had never faced before: caring for my family, supporting my mom through my dad's recovery, looking after my little brother, and experiencing the last two months of senior year while preparing for college—all in the span of a couple months. I pushed through the exhaustion caused by these new responsibilities, never allowing myself to grieve. As the oldest, I had no choice; I had to be someone my family could rely on. Looking back, I realize I didn't just step into responsibility, I stepped over my own grief, convincing myself that there was no time to feel anything. My desire to prove I was strong enough to handle these changes deepened my burnout in ways I did not understand until much later. This began my unhealthy internal competition, the constant need to succeed and make my parents' sacrifices worth it. This shaped both my identity and my relationship with achievement.

Hitting a Breaking Point: Recognizing Burnout

Spring 2025 was the first semester I experienced full burnout. I zoned out a lot, struggled to focus, lost sleep from stress, and felt far less academically capable than I had before. I was running on autopilot. It

was then that I realized the competition I put myself against was neither healthy nor sustainable. The pressure did more than just drain my energy; it made it difficult to live a healthy life.

I began to learn that self-care is not only about indulging in breaks here and there, but also about setting realistic expectations and giving myself permission to rest. I realized the importance of recognizing that my self-worth, which isn't measured by my productivity. I have learned that the word "no" is not a loss; it is an act of self-respect and preservation that is essential to sustaining success. I am rediscovering the hobbies I once pushed aside, like reading, painting, hiking, and spending time with friends. Making space for these activities in my routine has given me time to reconnect with myself outside of academia, to reset and rebuild my motivation.

Most importantly, I learned the value of sharing my struggles. Previously, I carried all the stress alone, internalizing a pressure that only grew heavier over time. Sharing my experience has lightened that burden, reminding me that I am not alone in this journey and allowing me to approach challenges with renewed perspective and resilience.

Redefining Myself Beyond Self-Expectations

Recognizing and addressing burnout is essential, but so is understanding where that burnout comes from. My journey has taught me that the standards we set for ourselves—shaped by culture, family, and societal expectations—can distort the way we see our own growth. In my case, comparison and culture amplified this pressure, creating the belief that my worth depended on how much I could endure without faltering. I tied my academic success directly to my identity, often measuring myself against ideals that

were impossible to sustain.

I treated my journey toward success like an endless late-night study session, where pushing myself harder felt like the only way to keep up. Eventually, I realized that resting and pacing myself was not slacking, it was necessary to retain motivation and balance. Identity is not defined by constant achievement. Choosing rest and honoring boundaries are not acts of failure; rather, ways of valuing myself as much as I value fulfilling the dreams my family has for me. Burnout has forced me to rewrite the standards I once lived by. Self-care is not selfish, but a vital practice of resilience.

If this resonates with you, allow yourself grace, set your boundaries, and remember that your worth extends far beyond your academic achievements.

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Blank Cards, Big Lessons: Rediscovering Joy Beyond Perfection

Elizabeth Sterling | University of Notre Dame

The store was bustling with last-minute shoppers scrambling to find the perfect gift, but I was there for something simple: an affordable card for a friend. I first discovered it while walking through the aisles at Hallmark three years ago. I spotted a large sign titled “Clearance” at the back of the store and decided to quickly glance around to avoid waiting restlessly in the lengthy checkout line. There was a small box in the back, next to delicate keepsakes and paper-wrapped trinkets. The box of cards was packed with blank cards and envelopes, offering no promises, no gimmicks. A bright red sticker stamped on the front read “Final Sale,” advertising a whopping 90% off, bringing the price down to two dollars and thirty-two cents. On a whim, I decided to grab the box, thinking it might be useful the next time I didn’t have time to purchase a card for someone. I checked out, drove home, and pushed it into the back of my closet, where it would remain forgotten, slowly gathering dust.

Waking up one January morning, I sluggishly rolled out of bed and stumbled down the cold wooden stairs, making my way to the kitchen to grab my phone. I unplugged it and noticed a flurry of notifications lighting up the screen. I scrolled through them mindlessly and half-asleep until one caught my eye: a text in my group chat with my friends that read, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY JORDAN!” Then, I glanced at the date: January 14th. In that instant, panic set in—it was my close friend’s birthday. I’d

completely forgotten, swallowed up by the whirlwind of life. I needed a gift, fast. My mind raced as I rifled through drawer after drawer in my house, trying to find something to reuse. When rummaging through my closet, I stumbled upon the small, forgotten box of blank cards. I put it on the kitchen table, opened the box, and examined the cards. Blank, simple, and white, with no frills or embellishments. They were perfect.

As I began drawing bright blue and green balloons on the front, I realized I could feel the texture of the paper beneath my fingertips and see each soft stroke of the pen leaving a visible mark of my thoughts. I found myself appreciating the newfound freedom and expression I had with the blank canvases. There were no expectations, and no pre-written words waiting to be followed—just a wide-open space where I could pour my thoughts, creativity, and care. I filled the card with thoughtful words, recalled my favorite days with my friends, wrote inside jokes and all of the other little things that made our friendship special. There was something freeing about creating the card. I wasn’t worried about refining the wording, double-checking my spelling and grammar, or sticking to any formalities. I didn’t mind that the ‘g’ in ‘going’ was barely legible or that I had to draw a small arrow to insert a forgotten ‘p’ in ‘appreciate.’ It felt refreshing and so different from writing a short message in a typical birthday card.

But at the same time, the emptiness of that blank card was a little

intimidating. No guidelines. No instructions. No way to make it perfect. As I stared at the pristine surface, I realized how much pressure I’d put on myself over the years to get everything in my life perfect. I was constantly worried someone would notice my clothes not quite fitting right, or how my curly hair was full of frizz and uneven ringlets, fearing that people were silently judging every small imperfection. This constant anxiety is something I struggled with growing up. I was always feeling overwhelmed by the weight of needing to impress my family and striving to meet their high expectations, whether they were about my grades, career path, or personal achievements. This only added to the pressure I placed on myself to be perfect: to not make mistakes, to not fail, to stop being flawed and human.

But this card was different. It didn’t have to be perfect. It just had to be real. Every stroke of my pen felt like a small rebellion against that need for perfection. In the past, I might have started over, looking at the lopsided blue balloon, slightly crooked lines, or the misspelling of compassionate. But today, I let them stay. I embraced the little imperfections because they weren’t flaws to hide or erase, but rather marks of authenticity. I left areas that didn’t look quite right, areas where the ink skipped, where the colors didn’t fill evenly, and where I accidentally misspelled a word or used the wrong tense. In that moment, I understood that this messy, human side of life, with all the mistakes and errors, was something to be celebrated and not covered up. The imperfections were a reminder of my effort, my intention, and my humanity.

I began to see the beauty in this “old-fashioned” way of communication, realizing that power past the actual written words—power to allow me to embrace imperfection. This is something digital communi-

cation doesn't offer. Screens make it easy to delete, retype, and perfect, but handwriting captures the moment as it is: messy, honest, and real. The act itself holds meaning: a reminder that there is true value in making something personal. Following this realization, I began to send more handwritten cards to my loved ones to let them know how much I appreciated them. I took time to reflect and create something that carried my thoughts, feelings, and time. In learning to value the imperfections of handwritten cards, I began to overcome my perfectionism and rediscover the joy of authentic expression.

When I was in high school, I wrote cards to sick children who would have to stay overnight in hospitals over the holidays (Figure 1). It didn't matter that my handwriting was sometimes sloped or that a few small coloring mistakes I

made along the way; what mattered was the thought and effort behind each card. This concept of writing to foster connection is echoed by Judy Jenkins, a teacher and writer. In her article, "The Power of Handwritten Letters," she emphasizes how the act of writing letters can reduce stress, improve memory retention, and foster deeper connections (Jenkins, 2023). This connection is something I could feel in my own life when my relationship with my grandmother was transformed by this simple practice. She always sent me holiday and birthday cards when I was younger, but I always texted or called to say thank you. I began sending her handwritten cards not only to say thank you but to tell her about important events going on in my life. It became a small ritual we both looked forward to.

As I sent more cards, the complicated cursive I mirrored from my

grandmother slowly improved and developed into a consistent style. As I wrote more by hand, taking notes in school became easier and aided my memory retention (Figure 1), a finding supported by research by Pam A. Mueller and Daniel M. Oppenheimer (2014). Both are cognitive psychologists, at Princeton University and the University of California, Los Angeles, respectively, exploring how writing mediums affect learning and memory. Their study, published in *Psychological Science*, showed that students who handwrite their notes outperformed laptop users on conceptual questions, likely because handwriting promotes deeper cognitive processing rather than surface-level transcription. This is further supported by Charlotte Hu (2023) in *Scientific American*, who reported that the physical act of handwriting is more effective for retention compared to digital methods. This connection

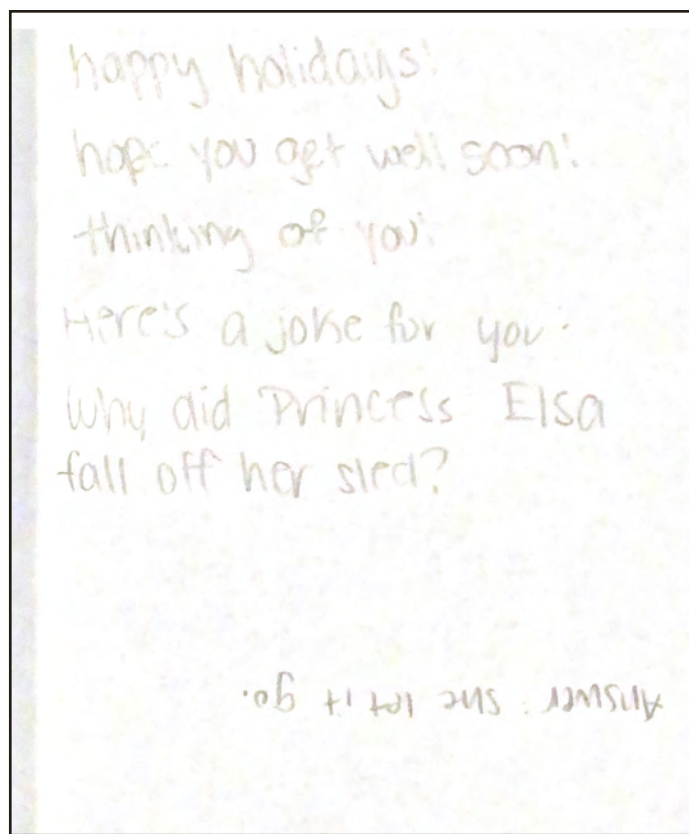


Figure 1. One of the cards I drew for children in the hospital, featuring a joke

is visible in the photograph of my handwritten notes (Figure 2), filled with arrows, quick scribbles, and attempts to capture key ideas in the moment. These marks, made during class or late-night study sessions, represent the way I engage with material: imperfect, yet full of effort and intention.

Figure 3 shows the physical nature of handwritten cards or notes means they can be kept and saved as keepsakes, holding memories in a tangible way that digital messages never can. Over the years, I've collected cards from friends and family in a small box on my bookshelf. Each one is like a time capsule: the handwriting, the creases, the ink smudges, and even the choice of stationery reflect a specific moment and relationship. When I reopen these cards, I'm able to revisit memories that might have otherwise faded. Unlike texts, which are easily deleted or forgotten, these cards endure. They hold not just words but moments and reminders of connection that I can return to again and again.

Most importantly, these cards taught me something far greater than the power of memory: they helped me let go of perfection. What began as a way to preserve memories became a way to release pressure. This was not an isolated experience, as in a study conducted by psychologist David Horvath (2023), the therapeutic effects of handwriting letters were proven to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety in almost all patients. I saw this effect personally as the act of writing cards also allowed me to shift away from feeling as though everything needed to be perfect. For so long, I felt pressure to meet high expectations in my work, my writing, and even in small daily tasks, leaving me burnt out and afraid of making mistakes. But when writing by hand, I couldn't hide behind the backspace bar or spell-check. A crooked line or smudged word couldn't be erased; it simply

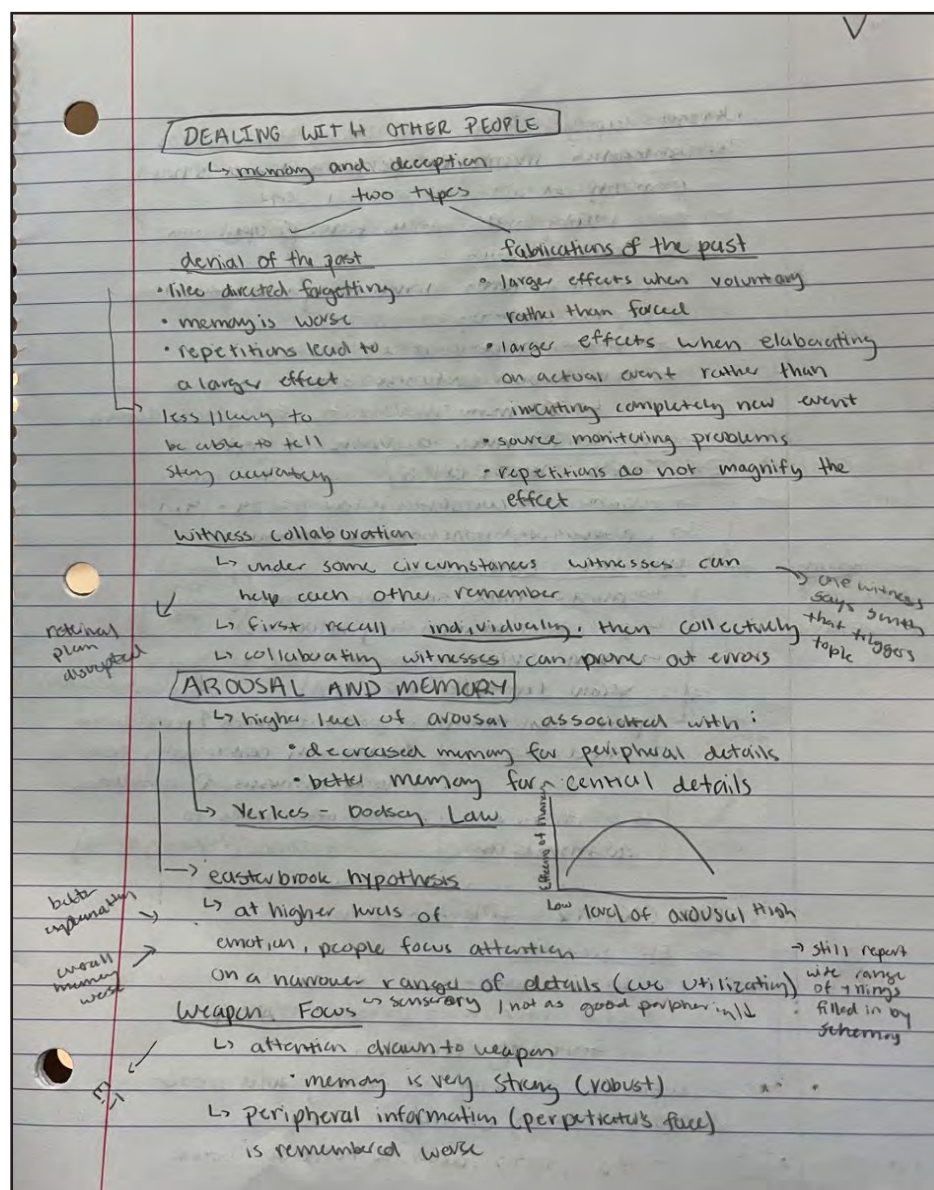


Figure 2. One of the pages of psychology notes I took in my Learning and Memory course.

became part of the card. Over time, these imperfections stopped feeling like failures and started to feel like evidence of care and effort. This process mirrored a larger emotional shift for me: I began to let go of rigid perfectionism and embrace the messy, human side of expression. What once would have made me anxious instead became meaningful.

Handwriting has benefits far beyond the personal, including academic. This idea aligns with Hu's (2023) reporting, which em-

phasizes that handwriting not only strengthens memory retention and understanding but also provides an opportunity for genuine emotional expression and connection that digital communication simply cannot replicate. I still remember the time I received a handwritten card from a friend during a particularly stressful week. The small imperfections, the messy handwriting, and even the occasional ink smudge all speak to the humanity of the act. Those imperfections are what make the gesture real and meaningful.



Figure 3. Professor Shumake's Office Shelf, containing cards and gifts from students.

This idea that imperfection carries emotional weight and creates lasting meaning is not just something I've experienced personally but something I've observed in others as well. Professor Shumake, one of my instructors in my first year of college, shared a photo of the shelf beside her desk (*Figure 3*), filled with handwritten notes and small gifts from students over the years. There's a pocket notebook from a student from Nicaragua and a handmade origami crane. She mentioned that the shelf reminds her, especially on hard days, that human kindness still exists. I found it moving that a tear-stained zine from a student, imperfect and heartfelt, could carry so much emotional weight. The heartfelt quality she described, beauty in imperfection, resonates with my reflections on handwriting. Like my cards, those objects aren't perfect, but they're full of meaning.

Ultimately, the practice of handwritten cards has become something I will carry with me for years as it allows me to let go of perfection and embrace mistakes. For so long, I felt constant pressure to meet impossi-

bly high expectations, from others and myself, often leaving me feeling burnt out and afraid to make errors. Writing cards offered a space away from that pressure where mistakes weren't only acceptable but meaningful. In an age of digital messages, instant replies, and filtered feeds, handwriting feels almost radical. It slows down communication, demanding presence and care rather than speed and polish. Each card becomes a small act of resistance against the pressure to perform or present a curated version of myself. Through the imperfection of card writing, I rediscovered a kind of honesty that digital spaces often edit out.

My cards are all kept in a small painted box, currently overflowing from the sheer amount stuffed in. Some cards are bent at the corners from being reread too many times. One birthday letter from my grandma is stained with a tiny splash of coffee. A get-well card from a friend has the ink smudged where my tears hit it. I even have a note scribbled on the back of a receipt, written in such a rush that half the words

tilt off the edge. These scraps aren't polished or perfect, but that's what makes them matter. I see the beauty of imperfection: each flaw a reminder of the human touch behind the gesture. That, to me, is something worth preserving, practicing, and promoting.

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Elizabeth Sterling is currently a sophomore pursuing a BBA in Marketing and Psychology at the University of Notre Dame, with a minor in Business Analytics. Upon graduation, she intends to attend law school and pursue work at the intersection of advocacy and communication. Her writing is shaped by an interest in human behavior and the narratives that emerge from everyday life. Outside of her academic work, Elizabeth enjoys working out, baking, volunteering, and spending time with friends.

Daily To-Do-List

Daniela Benitez | Cornell University

- ☐ **Wake up**
 - o Struggle to get up. Every day it is harder to get out of bed
 - o Fight the impulse to skip class. NEVER skip class
- ☐ **Breakfast**
 - o Add one spoon of instant coffee for every hour of missed sleep: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 spoons of instant coffee
 - o Notice the jar of coffee promises 105 cups, but is already halfway gone after 14 days of use—52 cups of coffee in 2 weeks
 - o Note to self: Buy more instant coffee
- ☐ **Walk to class**
 - o With tired legs, a tired body, a brain fuzzed by instant coffee
- ☐ **Sit through class**
 - o Take notes
 - o Try to stay awake
 - o Fight against your droopy eyelids that refuse to stay up
 - o Move leg and pinch yourself to prevent falling asleep—last resort to stay awake.
Result: failed
- ☐ **Lunch**
 - o Study for test while eating the most “nutritious-looking” sandwich on the café menu
 - Sit through class
 - o Take notes
 - o Try to stay awake
 - o Fight against your droopy eyelids that refuse to stay up
 - o Wish you had bought some coffee before this class
 - o Yield unwillingly to slumber, as attempts to stay awake failed
- ☐ **Walk back to dorm**
 - o Fantasize about the idea of lying in bed
 - o Reject that fantasy by creating a mental list of everything that must be completed on this day
- ☐ **Break (30 minutes)**
 - o Buy a Starbucks Doubleshot Energy Coffee (a treat)
 - o Distract yourself with the constant hustle of social media posts
 - o Fight the urge to take a nap. A nap = a loss of one or two hours of work
- ☐ **Homework**
 - o Read instructions of the assignment
 - o Open a blank Word document
 - o Type a sentence
 - o Delete sentence
 - o Read instructions again, trying to make sense of them
 - o Stare at blank document with blank eyes, with a blank mind
- ☐ **Crisis** [New addition to the list. In effect since today]
 - o Convince yourself that you must start working
 - o Put hands on keyboard. Retreat hands immediately

- o Distract yourself by scrolling on social media. “A short mental break to get inspiration to start writing”
- o Go back to the document
- o After some time of staring blankly at the document, give up, in spite of the voice in your head saying: “Don’t give up. Gotta work, work, work!”
- o Realize a weird inability to work (never felt before)
- o Ask yourself what is wrong with you
- o Feel unable to work, unable to consider the possibility of not getting work done
- ☐ **Dinner**
 - o “Dinner break might solve problem”
 - o Prepare and consume instant ramen noodles—the most convenient meal
- ☐ **Homework**
 - o Sit aimlessly at desk with a mind blanker than the Word Document
 - o Be unable to write, unable to work
 - o Be unable to take a break or a nap. “This time is scheduled for working, not resting”
- ☐ **Shower**
 - o Feel better because of the warm water
 - o Motivate yourself to come back and actually do your assignments
- ☐ **Homework**
 - o Open a new Word Document
 - o Get a good idea
 - o Start writing
 - o Realize it is 1 am
 - o Have a cup of instant coffee—number of spoonfuls...however many to prevent falling asleep
 - o Work
 - o Work
 - o Work
 - o Compensate for all the time you have lost today while you were unable to do anything except for doing nothing. Despise this fact.
 - o Work
 - o Work
 - o Work
 - o Feel dread when birds sing, the sky clears up, and a hue of sunlight peeks through the window
- ☐ **Go to bed**
- ☐ **Sleep**

-To be repeated in 3 hours-

Daniela Benitez, originally from Guayaquil, Ecuador is a recent graduate from Cornell University, where she majored in Communication at Cornell University, graduating in May 2026. On campus, she is involved in WVBR FM, Cornell’s student-run radio station, and theater. Daniela considers herself a high achiever. When she is not (staying up late) doing schoolwork, she can be found reading classic books and watching old Hollywood movies.

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Threads of Kinship

A Poetry Album | Bridget Voortmeyer | University of Utah

The Ordinary and the Extraordinary

The ordinary hums, a steady song,
 Days that stretch both short and long.
 Routine's rhythm, a soothing tide,
 In its embrace, we safely reside.
 But life whispers: Break the chain,
 A spark of joy, or a touch of pain.
 The extraordinary must appear,
 A moment to jolt, to make things clear.
 Not disaster's weight, nor chaos' might,
 But a fleeting blaze to ignite the night.
 An interruption, a shift in tone,
 A chance to see we're not alone.
 In these bursts, society's heart is shown,
 Power rebuilt, and solidarity grown.
 Hope rekindled in a fleeting flame,
 Reminding us life is never the same.
 For the ordinary and the grand must meet,
 A union that makes our days complete.

Invisible Strings

We have all of these invisible strings,
 So much in common that we don't see.
 We both are human and react the same,
 Both with experiences that feel so familiar.
 I look at some people and I feel so proud,
 Not because of their achievements or things they've scored or polished,
 But because of how beautiful their soul is.
 I look at you, not for all that you've accomplished,
 But for all the ways we are alike—
 All the unseen strings that connect us each day,
 All the dreams we want to reach,
 And the sadness we hold.
 I see you for the invisible strings we share.

In every laugh, in every tear,
 In every quiet moment.

The threads we hold, though delicate and thin,
 Are woven deep, stitched under our skin.
 We might not always understand,
 The weight of this shared human strand—
 But still, it pulls us close, like gravity,
 An invisible bond, a quiet unity.
 Through the joy, through the pain,
 Through the loss, and the hope we gain,
 These strings remind us we're never alone—
 Even when the world seems vast, unknown.
 They carry us, even when we fall,
 In the silent spaces, we hear the call:
 We are all connected, heart to heart,
 Bound by this ancient art.
 Tied together with invisible strings.

That Song

When vibrations dance along my spine,
 A chill whispers secrets, cold yet divine.
 Not just a melody, but the feeling it brings,
 A romantic escape where the heart softly sings.
 In shadows, I hide when the world feels too wide,
 Yet this song wraps around me, a comforting guide.
 It stirs within, a spark that bids me step outside,
 with a genuine smile I meet the world with grace,
 Seeing the beauty in each stranger's face.
 This song connects us, a universal thread,
 Binding all hearts, both living and dead.
 For we share this rhythm, this pulse, this art,
 In the chorus of life, we each play a part.
 Lovers and friends, family unknown,
 In the silence between, our souls have grown.
 So let it play on, that song of our kin,
 For in its sweet notes, we all can begin:
 To feel and to see, to love and to belong,
 Together in harmony, we thrive in that song.

Refine and Reform

Society keeps telling me to reform,
 Reform into a perfect ideal,
 To chase this American dream—
 But is it even real?
 A dream constructed,
 Not by us, but by the world's design,
 A lens through which they see the truth,

A truth that's never mine.
 Reform into someone who obeys,
 But when do we break the rules?
 When the rules are built on a corrupt foundation,
 A system that no longer serves the fools—
 The ones who don't fit the mold,
 The ones who dare defy,
 We're not perfect,
 But it's in our freedom,
 In how we break the sky!

To be told, "You follow the rules,"
 Was once a praise, a sign of grace,
 But now it feels more like a cage,
 A sentence I must face.
 I refuse to play their game, I refuse to be confined,
 I refuse to climb the crooked ladders, only to fall in line.
 So, I climb to tear them down,
 To shatter every stone,
 Because I'd rather burn the system
 Than wear it as my throne.

Toxic Masculinity

Are men the enemy, or is it the individual?
 Masculinity is woven into all of us,
 a beautiful piece that connects every person.
 There's no shame in embracing masculinity;
 Capitalism thrives on stereotypes,
 marketed to you, but you don't have to conform.
 You don't have to believe that to be masculine means you can't cook, clean, care, or love—
 that's toxic masculinity.
 True masculinity is a powerful force, just like femininity,
 And within each of us lies a piece of both.

To Love Without Fear

Fear, like butterflies,
 A fluttering uncertainty,
 That clings to love,
 Whispering love is fearful.
 But to trust is love,
 To earn, to embody,
 To desire, to understand—
 All is love.
 Yet to love myself,
 That is love without fear.

I Don't Want a Boyfriend

I am this whole person—not waiting for another half,
 But for a companion, a dear presence to love without losing myself.
 I don't want a boyfriend, no, I want a partner,
 someone to add to my already full life,
 to enrich, not to drain,
 to walk beside me and bring their own light.
 They are not my second half,
 but someone I can memorize—
 their favorite colors, flavors, and little joys,
 The flowers I'd give just to see them smile.
 I am whole, filled with my own being,
 Yet there's room here for someone to be near,
 not to complete, but to add
 to the wholeness of two.

A Crime

I study climate change in school—sustainability.
 And I'm scared.
 I have climate anxiety.
 I read books about hope, about progress,
 About moving forward, but I feel stuck.
 This recurring narrative has become routine—
 For those who aren't living it,
 It's easy to forget the daily suffering
 Of millions facing climate's harshest toll.
 Why do we keep profiting,
 While forests burn and oceans rise beneath our feet?
 Even as storms grow stronger and species vanish,
 When we need a new perspective, a new outlook?
 We have one planet,
 And the resources, knowledge, and technology to protect it.
 But when will this crisis—
 Our planet, its people, its ecosystems—
 Be more important than our selfish ways?
 When did our fellowship with the Earth
 Become another casualty of industry?
 Climate change is a crime.

Language Shapes the World

Language shapes the world.
 It's how we speak that sparks ideas,
 It's how we name the things that matter,
 How we give voice to what is often silenced.
 Let's talk.

Let's talk about the injustices we've ignored,
 Let's talk about the bodies that have been erased,
 Let's talk about the wars we've fought and the peace we've failed to keep.
 Let's talk,
 Because language shapes the world.
 Without it, we are lost in silence,
 Without it, we can't find common ground,
 Without it, we can't see the faces of or hear the voice of understanding.
 Let's talk about the wounds we've hidden, the truths we've buried too long.
 Let's talk to heal, to change, to rise above the noise.
 Let's talk to shatter old narratives,
 To rewrite the stories of who we are,
 To break the chains of apathy and fear.
 Let's talk not just to be heard,
 But to listen, to learn, to transform.
 Let's talk to make it relevant.
 Let's talk to make change.

Not As a Favor

Empathy is a right,
 not a favor to be granted,
 not a currency exchanged
 to uphold power or position.
 Why must we walk in another's shoes
 to begin to care?
 Why not offer empathy,
 because we exist as more than mere sentience,
 but as whole and radiant beings?
 To love the world
 for its own sake,
 not for what it gives back,
 That is the empathy we need.
 We peer in,
 like visitors at a zoo,
 scrolling for our next spectacle,
 our next post.
 But this is not a show.
 It's time to step in.

Land Acknowledgement

The sweet nectar of apricots, warm from the branch, raised me,
 Running barefoot through fields of golden dandelions in full bloom.
 I was raised by cold irrigation water, rushing from Cottonwood's spring melt,
 By cupped hands catching gophers and garter snakes drifting in its current.
 I was raised watching my mother and sisters,
 learning through their motions, wanting to know as they did, to wonder as they did.

This land, once home to the Ute, Paiute, Goshute, Navajo, and Shoshone Nations,
 Once rich in story, language, and care.
 Now, it echoes with absence, an absence carved by colonization.
 Her beauty bruised by theft, her song silenced by greed.
 I see the men in slick suits, oil-stained hands,
 rolling back laws while the rivers burn.
 They scoff at rising tides, turn truth to ash, and call it profit.
 But power is not wisdom,
 And silence is not innocence.
 Cool is not the ones who profit,
 It's those who choose what's right, even when it costs.
 When the Earth reclaims her due,
 Who will be remembered?
 When did our kinship with the land
 Break beneath the weight of industry?
 Why do we keep taking,
 While the planet pleads for something new?
 I see their pain as a mirror, reflecting the cost of our disconnection.
 And though the scale of harm overwhelms,
 I may not change the world,
 But I can change the world around me.
 After all, to love is to change.
 I know that change begins here, with me.
 We do not simply hear their stories,
 We carry them, breathe them, shape our days by them.
 The environment is not a backdrop;
 It is our shared canvas.
 We can still hear the laughter that once danced across these lands,
 Still feel the presence of those who tended and belonged to them.
 We can still hear the cries, fierce and aching,
 That rose in defense of all they held sacred.
 And still, I return to the apricots,
 To the cold creek water between my toes,
 To the smell of the dandelion field I lay in.
 I return, not in ignorance
 But in gratitude, in awareness,
 And in the hope
 That my care might begin to mend what was broken.
 It is our duty, our gift:
 To listen.
 To understand.
 To honor.

I, Bridget Voortmeyer, acknowledge that this land is stolen.
 And I support the Landback Movement.

My name is **Bridget Voortmeyer**, and I'm a third-year student at the University of Utah studying environmental justice and sustainability. Two years ago, I read *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, and the ideas of reciprocity, gift economy, and kinship stayed with me. I began noticing them in how I moved through the world, in relationships around me, and in the responsibilities we hold to each other and the land.

These ideas inspired a poem series titled *Threads of Kinship*, created to encourage others to look at the world more closely. Do you know the plants around you, or have you become a stranger? Do you see people for who they are, or only what they accomplish? Are you moving through our capitalist society without question, or choosing to imagine something better?

I hope my work encourages others to choose a path grounded in reciprocity, where sustainability becomes a way of being in relationship with the world.
