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**Contemporary Issues & Media**

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Writing into the Future:  
Possibilities and Projections



**DEPARTMENT OF WRITING  
& RHETORIC STUDIES**

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# The Undergraduate Journal of Contemporary Issues & Media

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# Table of Contents

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Letter from the Editor	3
<i>Maureen Mathison</i>   Editor	
The Reflection and The Self: A Narrative Poetic Inquiry of a Ballet Dancer's Body Dysmorphia	4
<i>Adelaide Pitcock</i>   University of Utah	
Flesh, Faith, and Fresh Ink	11
<i>Erin Robins</i>   University of Utah	
Veganism: The Unforseen Solution to a Water Crisis	17
<i>Amelia Webb</i>   Brigham Young University	
Sexuality and Mental Health in Comics: Exploring Minority Stress in Heartstopper	23
<i>Sam Honor</i>   Worcester Polytechnic Institute	
Individuals with Disabilities in Higher Education	32
<i>Delaney Carkhuff</i>   University of Utah	

# Letter from the Editor



**W**elcome, readers, to our 2024 volume. Since our last volume was published, much has changed in the world. What is striking is the level of investment that newer generations exhibit in enacting change for the good. We see in this particular complement of articles how the value of being in relation to self and others, including in the natural world, can impact our well-being. Our authors make visible the things that need to be changed and ask us to take time out to consider how we can be the change agents that make it happen.

Enjoy!

*Maureen Mathison*

# The Reflection and The Self: A Narrative Poetic Inquiry of a Ballet Dancer's Body Dysmorphia

Adelaide Pitcock | The University of Utah

## Introduction

More often than not, the first things that come to mind when a 'dance studio' is mentioned are images of sparkling wall to wall mirrors, a vast open room, and long wooden barres alongside twirling, jumping, stretching ballerinas. However, what most non-dancers do not realize is that underneath this shimmering façade, behind the sparkling reflection of the dancer, is a harrowing struggle of self-worth, accentuated by one's reflection in the mirror.

In some, this body image struggle is defined as body dysmorphia, or body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), classified as a "mental illness involving an obsessive focus on one or more perceived defects in physical appearance" (Shaffer 2). Whether the flaw, or flaws, one fixates on are considered major, minor, or nonexistent to others, the mere thought of them is all consuming to those suffering from BDD. Such individuals can appear completely 'normal' to outside observers while internally becoming "so hyper fixated on [their] appearance that they imagine this is how everyone from the outside views them" (Shaffer 2). This disorder can also cause individuals to succumb to repetitive behaviors, such as constantly looking in the mirror to attempt to see how 'bad' their flaw is. Regarding dancers, this impacts not only their identity as an artist, but also their self-worth in all other aspects of life. Further within the artistic realm, this disorder tends to be extremely prevalent in the collegiate and professional ballet dance community. These are environments where "the emphasis to be thin is a highlighted aesthetic," and the "imagery obsession in ballet" can cause dancers to become "neurotic about even the slightest blemish" (Barlaan 1, Ballet and Body Image 1).

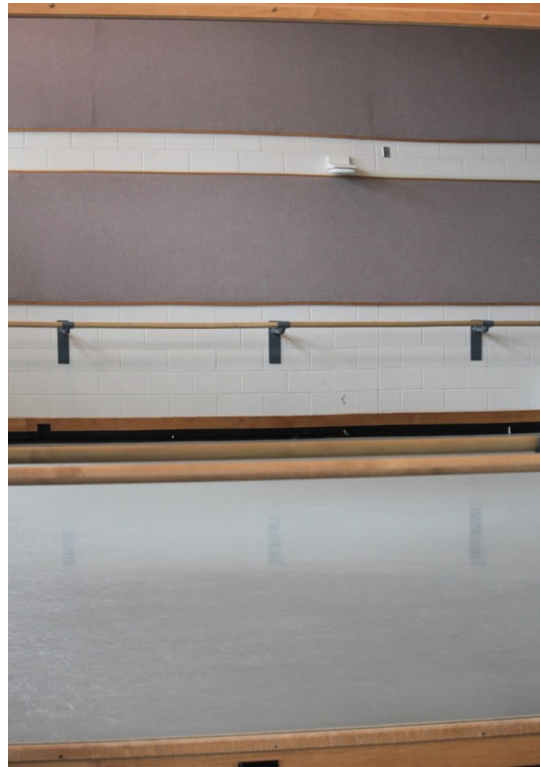


Photo by Kendall MacMillan

I started ballet when I was nine years old. When I was ten years old, I was told that my hips and breasts were too large to be a ballet dancer. When I was thirteen years old and going through puberty, I was told by a competition judge that I needed to see a nutritional specialist because my thighs were too big. And when I was fourteen,

I was told that it was my fault that my breasts were too large for my tutu and that I needed to 'shrink.' Finally, when I was fifteen, I was diagnosed with BDD, a disorder which, even at twenty years old, I still struggle with. Thus, for as long as I have been a ballet dancer, I have had a very complicated relationship with mirrors and my image. It has been something that has impacted not only my artistic identity, but also my identity as a woman, friend, student, and human.

My work presents a narrative poetic inquiry that, through a series of autobiographical poems, examines my body dysmorphia. In order to contend with and seek to better understand this condition, catalyzed by my experiences as a ballet dancer, this poetic inquiry attempts to give voice to the person behind the reflection. I will begin by examining the beginnings of when my body dysmorphia first began to occur, continuing to investigate how it has impacted my self-worth and self-image, and finally, postulating how I can start to see beyond the cyclical cycle of BDD.

Beyond the realm of the merely self-reflexive, the extended purpose of this research is to demonstrate how the incessant viewing of one's literal mirror image in ballet can be harmful to one's self-worth. Further, my work will aim to challenge the audience's preconceived notions of the identity of a ballet dancer. By reflecting on the detrimental tendencies that ensue because of BDD, this research elucidates the nonlinear nature of such a disorder and its repetitious state in the human psyche.

## Examining an Identity Through Poetry

As a poetic-narrative inquiry, this work also aims to reflect on the lived experience of the self when trying to understand how to formulate a ‘whole identity’. This methodology corresponds to what auto-ethnographer Adams Ellis terms a “powerful document that should not be overlooked by scientists and practitioners” when “concerned with understanding the lived worlds of humans who suffer from various psychosocial dilemmas” (12). Examining BDD through poetry has the power to become “therapy in better understanding the self, and thereby the rest of the world,” acting as an “important vehicle for understanding human experience” (Stroh 2,10). Thus, by representing data through “identity work,” it allows the audience to “receive it differently,” enabling them to better understand the hazardous state that body dysmorphia creates in the human psyche, especially for ballet dancers constantly in contact with their reflections. (Leavy 78).



Photo by Kendall MacMillan

## Reflections

By narrating my personal experience through this narrative poetic inquiry, I allow readers to “witness” the state of emotion inside the human mind. This allows readers to “observe and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience” (Ellis 15). My work not only presents human experience in a new light, but it also allows “readers to feel validated and/or better able to cope with their circumstances” regarding body image and self-worth (Ellis 8).

## The Other Side of the Mirror

This is the difficult story that maps the trajectory of how I learned to hate my reflection in the mirror. When I was nine years old, I distinctly remember going to the ballet for the first time. The curtain rolled open, and the lights brightened the stage...right then I decided that I wanted to be a ballerina. I began as a young girl with shimmering hopes and dreams of the sparkling image of a ballet dancer that I was going to become: an image of perfection and elegance...an image that I would search for every day in the mirror. When I was ten years old, I started to experience puberty, much earlier than all the other girls in my class did. I started to be told that my hips were too large to be a ballet dancer, that I needed to see a nutritional specialist because of my weight, and that, as a young teenager, I needed to find some way to ‘shrink’ because my breasts could not fit in the same costume from one year to the next. However, I was still fixated on becoming the shimmering ballerina in my hopes and dreams. So, I continued to go to the dance studios every day and try and fix myself, which turned into a hatred of my own image.

My poem attempts to give a newfound voice and essence to the identity on the other side of the mirror, beyond just a surface reflection. The repetition from stanza to stanza mirrors the spiral of self-negativity regarding my image: beginning when I was a young girl, continuing and growing throughout the next phases of my life. This is depicted as something that is terrifying, encapsulating, and very hard to break away from. Moreover, the personification of certain body parts as physical entities existing on their own, separate from the self, illuminates how a fragmentation of self occurs in the psyche. Further, the verses, surrounded by space, and weighted by silence, break through the barrier of surface level reflections and to the other side of the mirror. Here is where they provide a new essence of what composes the ballet dancer and how that worsens as the years go

*The Other Side of the Mirror, 2022*

Within the walls of the studio stands the young girl  
 Hair shined and slicked  
 Leotard skin tight  
 Pink tights shimmering  
 Back poised  
 Arms rounded  
 Feet gliding across the floor

She faces the translucent surface reflecting

everything she is told she should be and everything she will believe she isn't

Within the walls of the studio stares the adolescent female  
 The Leotard glued to curves she is beginning to hate  
 The Tights sticking to the the thighs she wished would disappear  
 She sees

Arms	Inflated
Hips	Protruding
Breasts	Bulging

She wonders why she doesn't look like the tiny girls around her  
 ...And why she is told that she should

Within the walls of the studio sighs the young woman  
 She can no longer look at the shining surface in front of her  
 She can no longer face the hips, the breasts, or even the hair  
 She hides in the corner hoping no one will notice her inflated arms and bulging thighs  
 Both scared and fixated on the broken image in front of her...

She hates everything that makes her whole.



Photo by Kendall MacMillan

on. By juxtaposing traditional elements in the life of a ballet dancer with the real feelings and images associated with them, this allows them to be considered differently regarding the image of a dancer.

### **Navigating the Shattered Reflection**

This poem continues to explore what exists beyond the reflection. The experimentation with form and a non-linear nature of words and thoughts seeks to symbolize and give voice to the irregular and disorderly thought process of those with BDD. Further, these thoughts fixate on erratic tendencies, while also removing conscious thought patterns from having a clear touch with reality. In this way, they really are broken and shattered pieces that I cannot seem to fit back together into the whole they once were. By establishing the harmful and repetitive state BDD creates in the personal life, even separate from the ballet studios, it demonstrates how consuming such a disorder can be to experiencing any part of life. Thus, this poem's prose not only seeks to encapsulate the repetitive natures that characterize the lifestyle of someone with BDD, but it also exemplifies "intrusive negative

*Navigating the Shattered Reflection, 2022*

Every morning  
 She chooses the pants that will hide the protruding hips  
 That will cover the bulging thighs  
 She searches for the shirt that conceal the breasts and blanket the curves

As she picks up the toothbrush she cringes  
 at the shining panel in front of her  
 In its smoothness she sees the shattered  
 and jarring reflection  
 Of everything she was told she should be...  
 And everything she believes she is not.

She is only  
 Pieces of the person she has become  
 Broken  
 Shattered  
 Shards  
 She doesn't know how to put the pieces  
 back together  
 They have been deemed unworthy for so  
 long  
 Pieces of  
 Thighs  
 Breasts  
 Hips  
 Always too big for the body they reflect  
 Never part of the person, only the problem.

thoughts” that overwhelm the self (Mind 2). By using emotional evocation to give meaning to the psychological problems I face, writing this poetry thereby serves as a method of inquiry into what characterizes my disintegration of self-worth (Ellis 2).

### As a reflection

This last poem symbolizes the new mindset I am trying to embody when coming in contact with my reflection. This reflexive form serves as meaning to depict the formation of a new thought process and identity. Each stanza contains the same words in the same pattern, but in the empty space in between them, they are reflected back upon one another, giving two different meanings. These meanings symbolize what is on both sides of the mirror: the reflection versus the self. Both are composed of the same entities but can be understood and seen differently based on perspective. I am trying to take the same harmful words that have plagued my consciousness for years on end and reflect them back to form a more complete identity. I believe that it is important not to forget or shut out the harmful thoughts that arise when dealing with harmful body images but accept them for what they are and use them to make yourself whole. As dancer and teacher KayCee Stroh elucidates, “with body dysmorphia, it’s not something that you can take a magic pill for and it goes away” (How Body Dysmorphia Affects Dancers). It is important to acknowledge the existence of the space between BDD and your actual self; in this space exists the power to change its impact. The space exists both in the poem and in reality, as a space where the mirror would be, or is. By taking control of the reflection, one has the power to reflect a new meaning from what lies in front of us.

### Conclusion

Overall, this research seeks to redefine the shattered image of someone experiencing body dysmorphia, where there were only broken pieces before. This is accomplished through three different auto-biographical poems that reflect on my BDD in different stages and scenarios. The first poem acts as a self-reflection as to the formation of BDD in different stages in my life; the second seeks to capture the state of BDD in my psyche, so was written

#### As a reflection, 2022

I hate the reflection of the woman in the mirror  
 No one will ever hear her say that  
 Every part of her is enough  
 She knows deep down that  
 The reflection of a body in the mirror defines how much she is worth  
 And that  
 Not having hips, or breasts, or thighs will make her happy  
 She refuses to believe that  
 She will ever feel whole  
 She is ashamed of the body she presents to the world  
 She does not believe that  
 She is more than what she sees.

She is more than what she sees.  
 She does not believe that  
 She is ashamed of the body she presents to the world  
 She refuses to believe that  
 Not having hips, or breasts, or thighs will make her happy  
 And that  
 The reflection of a body in the mirror defines how much she is worth  
 She knows deep down that  
 Every part of her is enough  
 No one will ever hear her say that  
 I hate the reflection of the woman in the mirror



Photo by Kendall MacMillan



while I stared at myself in a mirror, and the last poem is a reflection of the self: one that hopes for change.

As a poetic narrative inquiry, this work pushes the audience not to reduce the experience of BDD, but to explore, expand, synthesize, and integrate it in terms of acknowledging a whole person's existence (Leavy 80). This is, as Ellis suggests, that "the author of a poem presents his or her truth; truth in terms of his or her day-to-day reality," and by writing this truth as personal story, this allows for the audience's "witnessing" to be possible (4). This truth is universal and one that everyone can relate to, best summed up in the words of dancer Courtney Lui: "The mirror lies...[it] is a two-dimensional object, but we are three-dimensional beings" (How Body Dysmorphia Affects Dancers). As artists, humans, and everything in between, observing one's reflection and labeling one's self-worth can be complicated, disorderly, and even painful. But by learning to acknowledge and re-formulate the reflection's message, we can all learn how to put the pieces of our identity back together.

**Adelaide Pitcock** is currently pursuing a Ballet BFA and an English BA at The University of Utah. Upon graduation, she aspires to work as a professional ballet dancer with a company that fosters inclusivity, acceptance, and diversity. She also desires to work as an outreach artistic coordinator in order to foster a more holistic ballet culture that starts at its roots. Not only is Adelaide interested in the arts, she is also an avid reader of British literature and poetry, with a love of travel and learning new languages. This is why, after an artistic career, Adelaide also desires to pursue a career in immigration law.

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As a Utahn who consumes coffee and alcohol, I meet a lot of ex-Mormons, and every ex-Mormon I know has a tattoo. People who have disaffiliated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) self-identify as ex-Mormons even as the Church moves away from the “Mormon” mantle. The LDS church is one of many religions that can be described as high-cost “religious communities with distinctive doctrines, strong levels of in-group attachment and socialization, extensive member time commitments, and stigmatized exits” (Gull 100). In addition, high-cost communities also require their members to adhere to specific, value-based rules. These rules set them apart from general society. For example, the LDS church prohibits drinking coffee, tea, and alcohol, which is why you might find former members exploring previously forbidden landscapes of lattes and lagers.

For the past few decades, the US has seen a rapid rise in the number of people who identify as “none” in the religion section of polls and census forms. Most have disaffiliated from the religion of their youth (Fenelon et al. 49.) The rise in “nones” has spurred interest into the psychology of religious disaffiliation. Why are people leaving religion? In general, the answer can be attributed to two forces: inside forces that push members away and outside forces that pull them out (Engelman 155). These forces work simultaneously so that members feel alienated by their religion while also discovering outside communities to be more attractive.

Most disaffiliates report a lack of autonomy as a primary push force, especially among women in high-cost religions (Engelman 162). High-cost religions dictate how individuals should view and use their bodies. While restricted bodily autonomy affects everyone, it tends to have a greater effect on women, “A common feature of high-cost faiths is their belief in separate gendered natures and spheres of influence” (Gull 100). Abrahamic religions use the creation story of Eve to “define women through the very flesh they must monitor and master in order to be virtuous,” as Eve was created from the flesh of her male counterpart (Lelwica 25). Women’s bodies are legislated to modest dress and restricted to approved uses surrounding reproduction.

Male bodies are not exempt from these rules, as all bodies are “temples or tombs depending upon one’s ability to master its cravings” (Lelwica 25). It is considered virtuous to reject bodily desires in favor of spiritual ones. The body is seen as a source of temptation that must be controlled so that the soul may be preserved. High-cost religions dictate how members view or use their bodies, they often implement rules surrounding food or drink, and clothing or other bodily adornments. The LDS church specifically condemns “the tattooing of the body,” claiming that those who “disregard this counsel show a lack of respect for themselves and for God” (Tattooing). Bodies belong to God, to the LDS church, and, for women, to a priesthood-holding male (Brooks 201). It is understandable that disaffiliation from the LDS church is, in part, a physical act that reclaims flesh from faith.

## A Brief History of Tattoos

A tattoo is a permanent mark of culture made upon an individual. They have been a part of every culture throughout all recorded history. Evidence of tattoos can be found in Japan from 5000 BCE or older, Europe from 3300 BCE, and Egypt from 2160 BCE (Olson). With that kind of spread, it is impossible to give a blanket cultural meaning to tattoos. For example, in some cultures, tattoos on women were seen as a mark of beauty, while in others, they were a mark of inferiority. Despite historical and cultural differences, Anna Felicity Friedman finds that there are some universal functions of tattoos, specifically that they “construct identity, mark experience, and navigate social interaction.” Tattoos locate identity within culture in ways that no other social statements do because of their permanence. It is a lifelong commitment to a specific identity and culture. A tattoo changes a person’s body and impacts their interactions with the world at large.

The popularity of tattoos as body art is cyclical in Western history. Sometimes tattoos are stigmatized, and tattooed individuals are ostracized, while at other times, tattoos are viewed as approved creative expressions of identity. We are currently in a period where tattoos are

more generally accepted in public, and tattooed people are not stigmatized nor prohibited from social mobility. This popularity of tattoos is not entirely new to Western history, it's just the cyclical position we are in right now. According to Friedman, the stigma surrounding tattoos occurred largely in the early to mid-20th century. Prior to that, tattoos were more popular than we might believe today. However, there are new trends in tattooing that we haven't seen before. Large, visible tattoos are more desirable, and more women are getting tattoos than ever before—a good indicator that gender norms surrounding tattoos have also shifted.

## Methodology

Tattoos, while always an individual choice, tend to reflect or reject cultural norms. It makes sense for tattoo research to focus on a specific culture. The most compelling literature on tattoo history and meaning are centered on a specific time and place. My research focuses on self-proclaimed ex-Mormons who have acquired tattoos before, during, or after the process of disaffiliating from the LDS church. This research fits into the existing literature on the process of disaffiliating from high-cost communities like the LDS religion, as documented largely by Bethany Gull, and Ines W. Jindra and Justin Lee. Gull's research into women who disaffiliate from the LDS church is crucial to understanding how identity is formed during and after disaffiliation, while Jindra and Lee's work builds upon Gull's work in a more clinical capacity.

On a personal note, I do not identify as an ex-Mormon, nor am I currently a member of the LDS religion. However, I was raised and currently reside in Utah, where the LDS culture permeates every aspect of our society. Most of my dear friends have disaffiliated from the church. Some, like my husband, faced little to no difficulties leaving. Others faced intense struggles surrounding identity formation, and getting a tattoo was integral to their journey.

My research incorporates correspondence from individuals who identify as ex-Mormon and have tattoos. They were

asked to send a photo of their tattoo(s) and a brief description. Some participants discussed multiple tattoos, while others focused on only one. The tattoo art they submitted represents a variety of choices including alphanumeric characters, flowers, fairies, and pop culture references. It is easy to assume that ex-Mormons get tattoos as an act of rebellion. While rebellion is historically a part of any tattoo, my research proposes that tattoos also provide ex-Mormons the means to explore their identity through narrative, autonomy, and community from a freshly secular worldview.

## Narrative

Stories define us and tattoos provide a sense of permanence to these stories. A prime motivation for getting a tattoo is to document personal narratives through memories of major transitions, and important personal experiences (Buckle et al. 1). Disaffiliating from a high-cost community is a staged process of identity formation that creates a new narrative. The disaffiliation process can be painful, and tattoos can turn that temporary confusion into something permanently beautiful.

Raquel has a few tattoos (Figure 1) which all represent something specific and meaningful. One tattoo is a large, colorful depiction of a fairy amongst nine stars. The fairy represents Raquel's belief that "guardians are from the Fae" and the nine stars represent a story she read that helped her re-imagine a relationship with her



Figure 1. Raquel

parents. In the story, from the novel *The Enchantress of Florence* by Salmon Rushdie, an emperor seeks the counsel of “his most trusted advisor, who was the wisest of the Nine Stars.” The story acts as a parable about the subjectivity of truth. For Raquel, this story helped her understand that “very little in the world is black and white, but rather based on circumstance, vision, and personal stories.” Raquel explained her tattoos are “visual reminders of lessons, loves, and moments that I want to remember.” The tattoo on her shoulder is of a “living compass” that reminds her to not be afraid of new paths. She uses that same illustration as part of the branding for her company. Raquel’s tattoos reflect rich stories and the comfort she finds in them as part of her identity.

Tattoos can also serve to cope with grief and commemorate loss. For those that disaffiliate, the loss can be extreme. High-cost religions create barriers that insulate members from general society and therefore make disaffiliation incredibly painful. Exiting the LDS religion, specifically, can feel like “a disintegration of the all-encompassing symbolic-existential framework of reality once provided by religion that induces psychosis-like experiences of (dis)embodiment, derealization, and loss of self-affection” (Jindra 3). This is a transition akin to death, and the final stage of disaffiliation can feel like rebirth.

Larry’s tattoo (Figure 2) is of a simple number, 575, which is how much he weighed during a very difficult time. “I was in a very toxic and abusive relationship that stemmed from being married in the Temple. I lost



Figure 2. Larry

any small amount of self-worth that I had and gained weight up to 575lbs, because of the abuse.” Larry didn’t feel supported by leaders of the church and was disillusioned by the church’s increasing political

involvement. In 2013, Larry had weight loss surgery, and as he lost weight, he gained a sense of self-worth. The placement of the tattoo on his foot was intentional. He envisioned looking down at a different number on the scale. A quick, computational comparison that reminds him of the broader emotional comparison to his improved well-being.

### Secular Social Support

The loss of social support through community is the largest contributing factor to lowered health and well-being of people who exit high-cost religions. The reformation of identity requires “finding new secular social networks provided participants with validation, acceptance, and support” (Fazzino 259). Some disaffiliates are able to redefine relationships with their families. Unsurprisingly, they usually bond best with family members who are also outside the faith. Many ex-Mormons face the possibility of never repairing relationships with family and must forge a social support system from scratch. Social media helps former members find each other and support one another through various stages. Some disaffiliates join a low-cost religion which can offer guidance and a spiritual support that feels familiar. In all cases, ex-Mormons seek out new communities to join and often utilize culture to find their “people.”

Thayne waited until he was 50 to get a tattoo (Figure 3). Not because of any residual guilt or fear of sin, but because he “didn’t want something that would be embarrassing later in life.”

Thayne was talking to his daughter about tattoos and he asked “What is there in my life that I have cared about for 30 years?” She replied with “Dad. Star Wars.” That same daughter designed the Star Wars tattoo that he wound up getting. The tattoo



Figure 3. Thayne

represents not only a fandom that Thayne feels a part of, but also contains a family association.

While all tattoos have some cultural meaning, pop culture tattoos specifically tap into narrow and timebound cultures of entertainment. Pop culture should not be discarded as frivolous. It serves many of the same purposes as other types of cultures, offering a sense of belonging and positioning identity within shared values. Pop culture helps us index identity through aesthetic and storytelling ideologies. This sense of belonging within a culture is important for those who have disaffiliated from an ingrained religious culture. “Tattoos act as a public display of the self, an alliance to a particular social group, and a display of cultural values to the public” (Sherman). This display can be as heavy as wearing your heart/family on your (tattooed) sleeve or as light as an X-wing fighter jet.

### Autonomy

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20, The Bible (KJV)

The LDS church teaches members that their bodies are temples. In 2019, President Russell M. Nelson stated that tattoos are “graffiti on your personal temple” (Pearson). LDS temples are sacred places of worship where faithful members receive ordinances, blessings, and spiritual guidance. Not all LDS members may enter a temple, only those who have gone through the process of applying for and being approved for a temple recommend. So, when members are told their body is a temple, the implication is that their bodies are sacred, used for worship, and reserved only for the faithful. For ex-Mormons, getting a tattoo includes but is not limited to a rejection of that restrictive definition. The experience of getting a tattoo for an ex-Mormon is a more complete embrace of their bodies as temples as they redefine what sacred means to them.

Lamia has many tattoos (Figures 4 and 5) that she views as an expression of ownership over her body and “delight in that ownership.” For Lamia, the “act of receiving and caring” for tattoos is a type of “autonomous, caring, self-expression” that she was unable to experience within the LDS religion. Lamia works with children and has children of her own. Once a 6th-grade boy told her that the tattoos would look ugly

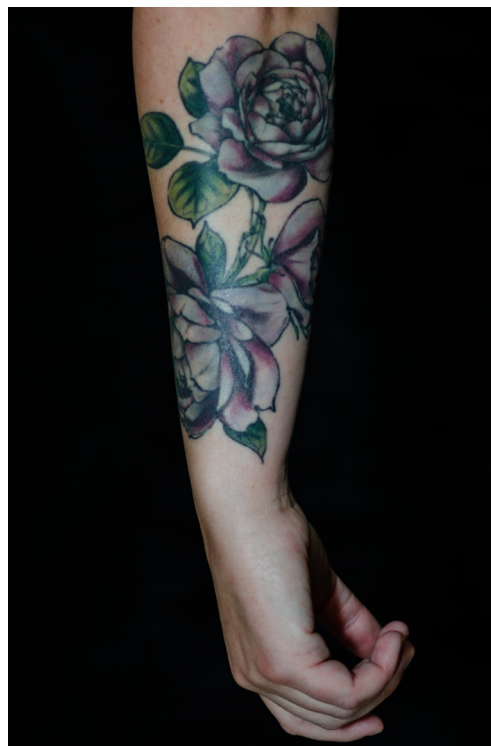


Figure 4. Lamia

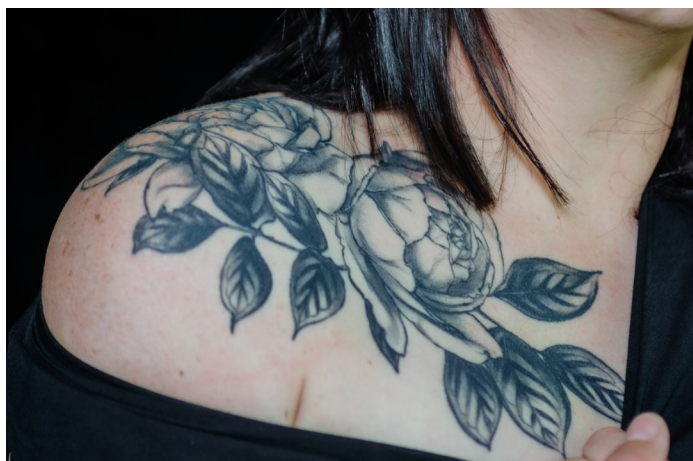


Figure 5. Lamia

when she gets old and Lamia believes “that’s only true if you believe old bodies are inherently ugly, which I don’t.” In addition, Lamia says that her daughter draws “tattoos” all over her legs with marker, “it’s no big deal; I love that she knows her body is hers.”

Ex-Mormon women often explore the visual appeal of tattoos to redefine beauty ideals. Many women within the LDS church enjoy the imposed modesty standards, but women who disaffiliate often express that they “had been unable to use their bodies as they wished and had been trained to look at them as an enduring source of sin” (Brooks 201). The current tattoo trends favor women’s autonomy and provide a type of liminal space for the material reconstruction of post-religion bodies. The physical health and well-being of people

who disaffiliate is notoriously low. However, recent research implies that the opposite is true of those who disaffiliate from high-cost religions, that “deconversion was eventually a liberating experience that evoked feelings of freedom, relief, and happiness” (Fazzino 262). The freedom and autonomy experienced during the exiting process can be overwhelming and stressful at times. Getting a tattoo allows creative control of that freedom which provides a sense of relief and can lay the groundwork for self-love.

Katy’s tattoo (Figure 6) has blurred over time. It reads “NON” the French word for “no.” From a young age, Katy felt like she wasn’t allowed to say no, “my church leaders and peers told me you shouldn’t say no.” She felt pressured into getting baptized, dancing with a boy, going on a date, and eventually getting married. When she graduated from BYU, she went with



Figure 6. Katy

friends to get a tattoo. “The tattoo parlor was called the Painted Temple and the guy who gave it to me had horns implanted in his forehead.” Katy felt guilt after getting the tattoo. She was worried about her family finding out about the “sin” she had committed against her body. After dissolving the toxic marriage she had been pressured into, Katy’s friends got her a necklace to celebrate her freedom. The necklace read “Oui.” Katy’s tattoo acts as a touchstone for the first time she made her own decision.

## Conclusion

Tattoos serve as stories we display to locate identity and see ourselves as individuals. This research focuses on tattoos of ex-Mormons tattoos and reflects that while tattooing is often an act of rebellion, it is also an act of self-identification through narrative, autonomy, and community. This research contributes to the

ongoing conversation about disaffiliation from high-cost communities. Studies that explore the various ways in which people heal from disaffiliation have applications outside of religion. Secular high-cost communities can include places of employment, political movements, and social media. Helping people exit these communities requires an understanding of the importance of story, creative control, bodily autonomy, and the acquisition of social support through shared culture.

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# Veganism: The Unforeseen Solution to a Water Crisis

Amelia Webb | Brigham Young University

Clean water is as necessary to planet earth as it is to human beings. We act as if it simply falls from the sky and, while it does, the earth requires more frequent and reliable sources of freshwater than rainfall. Despite this common knowledge, since 1960 alone, humans have tripled the amount of water used daily. This irresponsible increase puts a considerable strain on water resources available, and thus a strain on the worldwide economy. South Africa has experienced this strain firsthand in its legislative capital of Cape Town. In April 2018, clouds refused to cover the sky and the city was thrust into a severe drought. So dire was the situation, that government officials informed citizens to prepare for a pending date on which all water taps would be completely shut off. This date, ominously termed “Day Zero,” struck fear not only within those immediately affected, but peoples throughout the continent and across oceans. Figures 1 and 2 depict South Africa’s Theewaterskloof dam, and the alarming, waning perimeter over the course of just four years (“Cape Town’s Water”).

While Cape Town experienced early rainfall, thus terminating the looming “Day Zero,” the city passed legislation to better conserve water both generally, and in the event of a future hydraulic dilemma. This event provides evidence of the water-related issues present now in our world, as well as the human ability to alter environmentally-related habits for the better. The Global Risks Report of 2019 describes the repercussions of failing to

take action, and predicts that, “by the 2050s, more than 650 million people in 500 cities are projected to face declines in freshwater availability of at least 10%” (Global Risk Report, 64). This jaw-dropping statistic underlines our duty to ensure that future generations have an abundance of clean, potable water at their disposal.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to generational water sustainability is the food industry; booming beef, pork, and poultry production demands staggering quantities of water, and in so doing reveals a crucial—albeit unanticipated—opportunity for water conservation: plant-based eating. The realm of eating green has swelled to include a variety of sects such as vegetarians (meat avoiders), vegans (meat and animal product avoiders), honey-loving beegans, oven-fearing raw vegans, pescatarians, lacto-vegetarians, ovo-vegetarians, and paleo-vegans (de Groot). The significant number of intriguing plant-based diets is rivaled only by the number of reasons behind the dietary decisions themselves. While some salad-promoting soldiers fight to increase animal rights or biodiversity conservation, others strive to lower air pollution levels or the number on the scale. In fact, the reasons for removing meat from the menu go beyond animal-killer guilt (aka, the remorse from halving the lifespan of a distant cousin of the calf you met at that petting zoo last week). Throughout this paper I argue that traditional veganism is one of the most powerful means to conserve water and sustain planet earth.

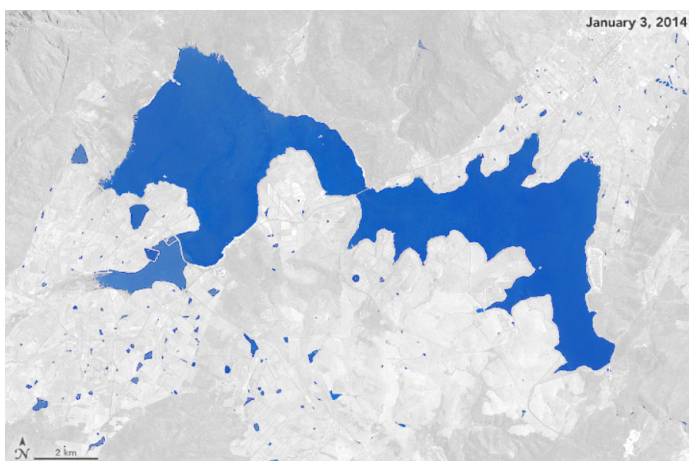


Figure 1. Water level of Cape Town's Theewaterskloof dam, 2014

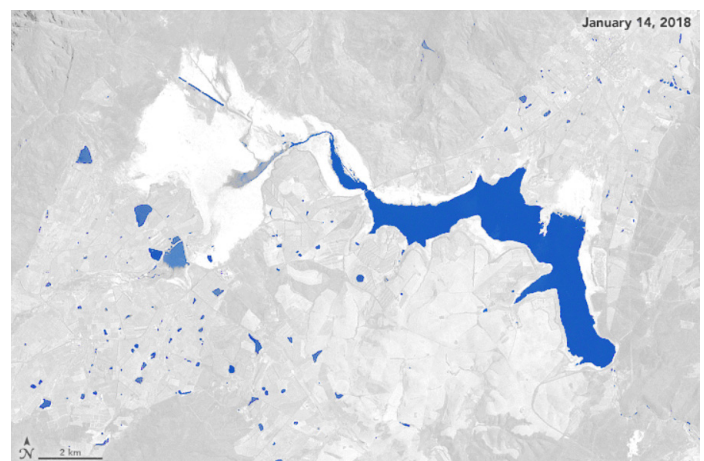


Figure 2. Water level of Cape Town's Theewaterskloof dam, 2018

## The Unspoken Truth Behind a Meat-Centered Diet

Before the bacon or the beef meets the kitchen table-top, numerous water-intensive steps ensure that the meat leaves the factory with flying colors in terms of sanitization. The animals are first shuffled into tight holding. As they proceed to the waiting area, they leave behind their last traces of life—a soiled floor, which must be promptly washed before the next, nearly identical group takes their places; with the endless cycle of cattle hooves comes an endless need for floor cleaning, a hydro sanitation measure repeated when cattle are cut at the throat, suspended by their hind legs and relieved of their blood. The remaining process is no less water intensive, as massive tanks of scalding water remove hair from carcasses and systematic cleansing removes organic material from meat-cutting machinery. This long day of work drenches employees in the stench of meat and chemicals, demanding extended showers. Ultimately, it doesn't take much to recognize the water intensive process that is meat production (“Meat Processing”).

A meat-centered diet further hinders water conservation efforts in that it diverts a staggering amount of water away from human mouths and into those of Livestock. Where the average human drinks 2-4 liters per day (“Water: How Much”), cattle demand substantially more. According to Ontario’s ministry of agriculture, food and rural affairs, a beef cattle in the 800-1,400 weight range requires, on average, 41 liters per day, (“Water Requirements”). In further comparison, where a single beef cattle might consume approximately 14,965 liters of water annually, humans only consume around 1,095. This indicates that the disappearance of just one cow from the system would liberate roughly thirteen years’ worth of water resources for the use of a single person. Cattle are not disappearing from the equation, however, and a whopping 33.7 million heads of U.S. cattle were slaughtered for beef in 2018 alone (USDA). While smaller species, such as chickens and pigs, may individually drink less water than a cow, collectively they consume equally impressive quantities of water as their black-and-white spotted friends.

## The Staggering Reality of Livestock Water Consumption

Thus far, we have established that refusing to consume meat is comparable to refusing to waste water. The practice of avoiding meat consumption is considered

vegetarianism, which poses a question: is traditional veganism, the practice of refusing meat and other animal products, necessary for optimal water conservation? How might the sacrifice of authentic Italian gelato, grandma’s homemade mac-and-cheese, or other dairy-containing delights prove just as environmentally sustainable as the sacrifice of pork chops? The answer lies in the fact that milk is comprised of approximately 87.3% water (Raw Milk Facts). With a water percentage this high, dairy cows must maintain high levels of hydration if they are to supply milk while still retaining adequate water for themselves.

In fact, a cow that produces 45.5 liters of milk per day requires 115 liters of water on average per day, a number that increases in the case of dry food and a blazing sun. As evidence of high levels of water ingested by dairy cattle, in 2019 so far, 513.22 million metric tons of cow milk have been produced globally (“Cow Milk”). Consider how many liters of water were needed to produce those millions of tons of milk. This indicates that approximately 513.22 trillions of liters of water were necessary for the production of those millions of tons of milk. Millions of liters of water are not only devoted to animals to provide them drink, but also to produce their feed.

Land devoted to raising livestock extends across 30% of global land surface, claiming 70% of agricultural land (Stoll-Kleemann, O’Riordan, 3). The grasses and grains that blanket the land require consistent watering, water that could be devoted to raise crops for humans to consume first hand. This fact further enlarges livestock’s water hoof-print, a point that is reinforced in the article, “Standing in Livestock’s ‘Long Shadow’: The Ethics of Eating Meat on a Small Planet.” Brian Henning, devoted environmentalist and faculty fellow for sustainability at Gonzaga University, emphasizes that “it takes 1,799 gallons of water to create one pound (0.5kg) of beef, 576 gallons for one pound of pork, 468 gallons for one pound of chicken, and 216 gallons for one pound of soybeans. Ultimately, it is estimated that producing one kilogram of protein requires 100 times more water than producing one kilogram of grain protein” (Henning, 8).

Perhaps such a significant gallon-demand difference between plant and animal product could be justified if protein-levels in animal products far exceeded plant products, but research has proved otherwise. Through the Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations released a report regarding livestock’s impact on the environment. In it, they attest that “livestock consume 77 tonnes of protein contained in feedstuff that could

potentially be used for human nutrition...[in contrast,] only 58 million tonnes of protein are contained in food products that livestock supply” (Steinfeld, 270). This pathetic contrast confirms that, if humans were to commit to eating foods ranked lower on the food chain, we would more efficiently use the crops that we pour so much time, energy and water into growing.

### Toxins and Other Repercussions of a Booming Meat Industry

Multimillion-dollar meat-producing corporations similarly value their time, which may be the reason they have yet to establish a water-conscious method of disposing animal feces. For example, pig dung on hog farms is channeled into pipes before being spurt out into a pink-hued, massive vat of horror—a site that, from afar, might be mistaken for an extraterrestrial swimming pool. These “toxic, feces-filled ‘lagoons’...are often hundreds of feet long and are fetid cesspools of waste” (Merchant).

In order to maintain the viscosity of the eerie lake, extensive amounts of water are flushed into the pools along with the waste. Many of these pools are situated near residential areas, driving neighbors to lament the changed state of their shallow wells, water sources that now produce odors inconsistent with the nature of water. This is the result of waste water seeping into the ground of surrounding areas and is not the only way by which contamination occurs. Torrents of rain flood the lagoons, while blustering winds transport toxic water particles great distances. This nightmarish scene occurred recently in South Carolina, where 13 of these lagoons overflowed. Figure 3 depicts a standard hog-feces pool, whereas figure 4 portrays one that has suffered the aftermath of a hurricane (“North Carolina Faces”). It is moments of widespread biohazardous organic matter contamination of landscapes that should wake up the world to the realization that meat production has unhealthy repercussions.

Repercussions of meat production occur even after the animal is long gone. This can be attributed to the fact that only a certain percentage of each animal carcass is severed with the intent to be sold. To be exact, just “50-54% of each cow, 52% of each sheep or goat, 60- 62% of each pig...end up as meat consumed by humans with the

remainder becoming waste after processing” (“Report of the Meat,” 283). Improper incineration or burial of these remains brings the potential of either airborne or soil-living pathogens encountering freshwater sources. In stark contrast, vegetable production leaves no such lethal waste in its wake, as unused parts of vegetables are easily composted and returned to join forces with mother earth.

### Surprising Benefits of Veganism and the Question They Pose: Why Haven’t We Switched?

Though veganism eliminates a need for meat production and water intensive steps, vegetable production requires processing and washing as well, causing one to question how effective the switch to a plant-based diet is.



Figure 3. Hog feces pool



Figure 4. Hog feces pool after a hurricane

While it is true that most food products require processing and washing, the processing and washing needed for

meat products is much higher. The need for more attention can be attributed to the presence of blood in animal products, which is considered to be a pollutant. In order to determine the level of pollution in a substance, one can measure its biochemical oxygen demand (BOD), or, in other words, how much dissolved oxygen aerobic biological organisms require in order to break down the substance. Thus, the higher the BOD level, the higher the toxicity of the substance. To provide a comparison point, the BOD of raw sewage ranges from 200-600mg/L (Biochemical). In stark contrast, blood is considered to be “the highest polluting value with a BOD ranging between 150,000-200,000 mg/L” (“Meat Processing”). It is logical that, with the presence of such a potent and plentiful contaminant within their walls, meat producing factories require more frequent and thorough water-related sanitization steps to meet basic health requirements. However, in order to fully eliminate the danger in vast amounts of potentially lethal blood, vast amounts of water are not enough. Thus, workers recruit sterilizers to battle the bodily fluid, they flush chemicals down along with the waste, which runs a risk of contaminating additional fresh water sources. Such powerful sterilizers are unnecessary to vegetable processing, thus solidifying the water-conserving power of a plant-based diet.

If the production of meat comes at such an environmental cost, why is this not reflected in the price listed next to each item on fast food menus? This concern is addressed in the article, “According to Sustainability of Our Meat and Dairy Needs,” where the authors reveal how factories recruit financial assistance.

In fact, “in sum \$52 billion is paid to subsidize fodder and animal products. Pig meat is supported by \$7.3 billion and poultry by \$6.5 billion. In Europe, 12.5% of the gross receipts of farms for livestock is paid by the government...[and] in many countries, meat is subject to a reduced level of value-added tax” (Stoll-Kleemann, O’Riordan, 10). These stats as a whole describe the extent to which meat industries benefit from legislation, a competitive advantage that results in high-priced plant-based alternatives.

Despite the power that the meat industry wields, there is still hope for a cleaner planet. This hope can be manifest in our simple day-to-day decisions—choices that prove the attainability of a vegan lifestyle. The popularity of plant-based eating has skyrocketed within the century, leading to seemingly infinitely many and infinitely delicious vegan recipes flooding the internet via YouTube, pinterest, blogs, etc. In equal manner, niche vegan restaurants have exploded in popularity, which allow for

individuals to continue participating in the social tradition of catching up over a meal without “eating-out” coming at the expense of a global water crisis.

While every vegan-centered decision and plant-based purchase is a vote cast towards meat corporation elimination, realistically, it is a global and commercial shift towards veganism that is key. How will that come about? The discussion is open. While there may not be a clear solution in sight, one thing is certain: though past actions have diminished clean water sources and wounded the world, future actions don’t have to.

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# Sexuality and Mental Health in Comics: Exploring Minority Stress in *Heartstopper*

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## Introduction

*Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman is a *New York Times*-bestselling graphic novel series that features a gay male protagonist, Charlie, who has obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and an eating disorder. Through major plotlines centered around homophobic bullying and the resulting trauma, Oseman explores the complicated connection between Charlie's sexuality and mental illness. This article analyzes the rhetorical choices Oseman makes that enable this accessible and sensitive depiction of the interplay between queerness and mental illness.

Though there are other comics that explore this connection—notably Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*—I am specifically looking at *Heartstopper* to analyze how Oseman explains such a heavy concept in a generally upbeat manner. Furthermore, I chose to analyze *Heartstopper* because I want to investigate the nuances of communicating mental health topics through a culturally significant fictional work. After a well-received 2021 Netflix adaptation, the comic soared in popularity, topping UK and US bestseller lists (“Sales of Alice Oseman’s Work Surge”). Studying how sexuality and mental illness are portrayed in popular media can illuminate what techniques allow for effective mass communication about sensitive topics.

## *Heartstopper* Background

*Heartstopper* is an ongoing English slice-of-life romance that started as a webcomic in 2016. The graphic novel series contains the same content as the webcomics, though the latest chapter of the comic has not yet been published in print. Each volume of the *Heartstopper* graphic novel series contains a major plot arc. Volume One concerns openly gay Charlie befriending the presumably straight Nick. The pair grow closer than friends, and ultimately kiss at the end of the book. Volume Two mainly concerns Nick realizing his bisexuality and coming out to his mother. Volume Three focuses on Nick and Charlie coming out as a couple, as well as Nick's increasing concern for his boyfriend's

disordered eating. Volume Four explores how Nick and Charlie express their affection for one another, with Charlie garnering the courage to say “I love you” and Nick supporting Charlie through seeking treatment for his eating disorder. This is a broad overview of the major plot movements of *Heartstopper*; there are, of course, smaller arcs that augment and advance this main narrative and develop its characters.

## Background Information

### *LGBTQ+ Health Disparities*

LGBTQ+ representation has been a trending topic in discussions around popular media, including Comics<sup>1</sup>, for a number of years. Visible queer identities can provide an affirmation of normality to isolated, self-questioning youths and can stimulate dialogues that evolve societal attitudes around LGBTQ+ acceptance (Ayoub and Garretson). Works that portray queer joy are especially effective at challenging negative stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people (Iacovelli). This support can be a protective factor for the well-being of queer youth, who experience mental health issues at an elevated rate compared to their peers (Russell and Fish 4–7).

One explanation for this mental health disparity is minority stress theory. First proposed by Ilan Meyer in 2003, the minority stress model contends that distal (external) stressors unique to non-heterosexual populations can become proximal (internal) stressors that worsen mental well-being (8). Meyer notes three core stress processes individuals in this population experience:

- external, objective stressful events and conditions (chronic and acute)
- expectations of such events and the vigilance this expectation requires
- the internalization of negative societal attitudes (5).

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowing a convention common throughout Comics Studies, I use the capitalized and uncapitalized forms of “comics” to refer to different concepts. The capitalized word “Comics” refers to Comics as a medium and an area of study; the lowercase “comics” refers to individual works (e.g., *Heartstopper* is a comic).

This set of unique stressors predisposes non-heterosexual populations to worse mental health outcomes.

### *Comics Studies*

Comics can be used as a tool for educators and healthcare providers to open difficult conversations about queerness and mental illness in an accessible manner. Graphic Medicine is an academic field that has recently emerged in order to study how Comics are used in this manner. As expressed by Czerwiec et al. in *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*, “Comics have often been associated with cultural change and are ideal for exploring taboo or forbidden areas of illness and healthcare” (3). Graphic works offer a narrative structure that humanizes those with illnesses as opposed to reducing them to a bundle of symptoms. This personal touch is important when communicating with stigmatized groups, as it reinforces that their identity is not something to be medicalized. By utilizing Comics, health educators can more sensitively broach the topic of how the unique experiences that come with an LGBTQ+ identity can affect a person’s mental health.

Furthermore, comics like *Heartstopper* that have well-rounded characters can engage the reader and spark self-reflection. As explained by McCloud in *Making Comics*, “finding common ground between the experiences of your characters and those of the reader can help emotionally connect them—while the differences in life experience can trigger many stories” (65). For readers living with the same health condition as a character, a comic can challenge the loneliness and underrepresentation that can come with illness. For those not living with the depicted illness, finding common ground with a sick character can build empathy and challenge stigma.

To study how Oseman effectively communicates the connection between sexuality and mental illness, I will be focusing primarily on Charlie’s storyline in *Heartstopper*, as this is the only plotline that directly addresses mental illness. I am particularly interested in how Oseman’s development of Charlie’s trauma aligns with minority stress theory. I will also investigate how her depiction of psychotherapy matches up with modern counseling techniques. These alignments will serve as indicators of whether the information *Heartstopper* is communicating is an appropriate depiction of reality. Lastly, I will look at the pacing and characterization techniques Oseman uses to develop the relationship between sexuality and mental illness in

a way that is compatible with the upbeat mood of the comic.

### **Minority Stress Theory in *Heartstopper***

Events in *Heartstopper* demonstrate how the three stress processes of minority stress theory—“objective stressful events ... expectations of such events ... and the internalization of negative societal attitudes”—build on each other and worsen mental well-being (Meyer 5). Instances of homophobic bullying serve as the foundation for the development of Charlie’s trauma. These occurrences create expectations and anxiety about future harassment. As Charlie’s fears become reality when he faces even more bullying, he begins to believe and internalize the hatred he experiences.

### *Distal Stressors*

Oseman presents multiple instances of anti-gay bullying and harassment throughout *Heartstopper*. These events range from microaggressive comments to slurs intentionally uttered as an act of hatred. One important choice Oseman makes in scenes portraying bullying is having the target and/or bystanding characters challenge what is being said. This decision averts making queer characters hapless victims while simultaneously modeling how to stand up for oneself and others. Of course, opposing homophobic harassment does not erase the harm it causes. Oseman recognizes this by exploring how specific instances of bullying traumatize Charlie.

The most direct episode of homophobic bullying occurs when Nick invites Charlie to the movies to meet his friends for the first time. Harry, one of the boys in Nick’s friend group who showed up uninvited, aggressively hounds the visibly uncomfortable Charlie with questions about his sexuality (Volume Two 216–20). Nick repeatedly intervenes until he finally shoves Harry away, walks Charlie out, and profusely apologizes for what went on (221). Charlie responds by stating, “It’s fine Nick ... I’m used to it by now” (223). The next time the reader sees Charlie, he is lying in bed, awake, staring dejectedly at his bedroom wall (237). Clearly, it wasn’t “fine.” Despite Nick standing up for him, Charlie is still hurt by this experience.

After Charlie leaves, Nick confronts Harry. This plot arc culminates with Harry calling Charlie a “pathetic little fag” and Nick punching him in response (Volume Two 231). Oseman makes several critical rhetorical decisions in this scene that maintain the integrity of the narrative and amplify its message. Notably, she



chooses to leave the f-slur uncensored. It lingers in the air, shattering all panels below and seemingly making Nick snap and strike Harry. By not censoring this slur, Oseman affirms that *Heartstopper* is not going to cater to the sensibilities of those who are more concerned about a bad word than the abuse it entails. Another important choice Oseman makes in this scene is having Charlie leave before the slurs and violence begin. Since this scene primarily serves to develop Nick's character, leaving Charlie absent avoids creating a traumatic event that doesn't substantially contribute to the text. While the events at the cinema illustrate Charlie's response to a single objective stressor, the greater value of *Heartstopper* lies in exploring how repeated stressors cause trauma.

### Internalization

The bullying events examined in *Heartstopper* provide a base from which to develop Charlie's internalized trauma. Oseman uses repeated instances of people calling Charlie "gross" to establish that this harassment is a pattern that reflects the homophobic attitude of the world he lives in, not just the work of a few mean people (Volume One 99; Volume Three 73; "*Heartstopper* 7 - 13"). Since *Heartstopper* focuses more on recovery than dwelling on prejudice, these instances are portrayed in retrospect and briefly convey schoolmates' reactions after Charlie is outed a year before the story begins. As the narrative progresses, developments reveal how these recurrent experiences from the past actively harm Charlie's mental well-being.

Oseman demonstrates how Charlie internalizes this bullying by putting the same words used to harass him into his internal monologue. As he struggles to eat at the beach with his friends, the edges of the panels fall apart and the words "gross" and "disgusting" fill the air (Volume Four 52) (Figure 1). Further highlighting the internalization of harassment, Charlie explicitly acknowledges that he "started to believe what [the bullies] were saying" and began to self-harm (Volume Three 75). To tie this concept of internalization together, Oseman has Charlie's therapist Geoff refer to experiences with bullying as "trauma" for the first time (Volume Four 295). Having a therapist introduce a concept that explains and validates the connection between homophobic bullying and mental illness directly informs the reader that such a connection exists.

### Mental Illness and Healthcare in *Heartstopper*

In the first section of my analysis, I looked at how



Figure 1 ("*Heartstopper* 5 - 7")

Oseman depicts stressors related to minority stress. As discussed earlier, merely showing the reader that these stressors exist is not the author's final goal with *Heartstopper*. I contend that the greater value of this comic lies in the recovery-focused narrative around Charlie's mental illness. In this section, I will look at the techniques and choices Oseman uses to craft a narrative centered around recovery.

Charlie's eating disorder and body image issues are slowly developed in the early exposition of *Heartstopper*, but rapidly worsen and come to the forefront of the plot in Volume Three. Oseman includes small details early on—such as Charlie rarely eating or taking his shirt off in front of others—but the reader's concern for him develops alongside, not ahead of, Nick's. Forgoing dramatic irony creates a more authentic narrative that brings the reader into the process of helping someone with a mental illness (refer to later section on Characterization).

Nick's inability to directly "fix" Charlie with his love is a deliberate rhetorical choice that maintains the authenticity of *Heartstopper's* portrayal of mental illness. Despite caring deeply for Charlie, nothing Nick says can force him to eat. The first time Charlie eats in front of Nick only occurs after a fainting episode (Volume Three 219). Later in Volume Three, while Charlie builds up the courage to tell Nick he loves him, Nick decides how

to convince Charlie to seek medical attention (Volume Three 349–51). In her Volume Four author's note, Oseman explicitly acknowledges this aversion of the "love conquers all" trope: "romantic love does not cure mental illness, as movies often suggest ... Nick can be there for him, but Charlie has to find his own path to recovery" (Volume Four).

Oseman's depiction of mental healthcare further bolsters *Heartstopper's* utility as a tool for dispelling stigma. In Volume Four, Charlie seeks inpatient eating disorder treatment. To confront the stigmatizing mystery that often surrounds psychiatric hospitals, Oseman directly portrays her protagonist's experience with this type of care. One important misconception *Heartstopper* challenges is the idea that inpatient care is necessarily an isolating experience. Charlie is shown calling home, being visited by his family and Nick, and playing cards with others on his floor (Volume Four 254, 288). His stay at the psych ward is shown to be occasionally difficult, but ultimately healing. In his own words, "some days were awful, but a lot of it was fine" (Volume Four 288). Aside from confronting fears and misinformation about inpatient care, Oseman also shows the reader what some of the treatment might entail. Charlie is diagnosed with anorexia and OCD, attends therapy, and meets with a nutritionist to make a meal plan (288–290). Oseman ends this plot segment by recognizing the ultimate purpose of inpatient treatment. As Charlie puts it, "being in hospital didn't make me completely free of mental illness ... but it got me out of the deep end" (292). This acknowledgment sets the stage for recurring outpatient counseling throughout the rest of the book.

The therapy session in chapter seven is worth briefly focusing on. This section not only explores Charlie's anxiety around body image and intimacy, but also models cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)—a common approach for the treatment of various mental illnesses—and an effective therapeutic alliance, where patient and provider work together to define and actualize therapy goals (DiAngelis). Charlie begins by speaking openly about how he feels his body is disgusting and that he feels irrationally afraid of intimacy with someone whom he deeply trusts. His therapist Geoff responds by explaining how the traumatic experience of being abused by his peers after coming out can make it difficult to relinquish some control and trust someone in an intimate situation ("*Heartstopper* 7 - 13"). This process of identifying troubling thoughts, validating them, and exploring how to cope with them is a cornerstone of CBT ("What Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy?").

Additionally, Geoff maintains a positive therapeutic alliance with Charlie by highlighting his strengths. When Charlie mentions he wishes he was confident enough to trust Nick, Geoff mentions that he had the confidence to confess his feelings to Nick in the first place. The session ends with Geoff telling Charlie he believes in him ("*Heartstopper* 7 - 13"). This glimpse into Charlie's therapy session provides the reader with a realistic depiction of modern counseling techniques.

In order to bring the discussion about mental illness off the page and into the world, Oseman includes links to several resources that are specifically focused on mental illness and healthcare. Most of these are included as pamphlets handed to the character or web searches. For instance, Charlie is given two handouts discussing anorexia and OCD after he is diagnosed in the hospital (Figure 2). Both contain some basic information about their respective condition and provide links to British health websites, including OCD UK and Beat Eating Disorders, where the reader could find more information (Volume Four 290). This inclusion of authoritative sources for further reading heightens *Heartstopper's* value as a tool for classroom and patient education.

### How Oseman Facilitates the Exploration of Mental Health

Previously, I've discussed how Oseman explores minority stress, mental illness, and mental healthcare in *Heartstopper*. While these are certainly important parts of the plot, the comic as a whole tells an upbeat story about a high school romance. One key element that allows discussions about heavier mental health topics to take place within a cheery romance comic is *Heartstopper's* focus on support and recovery. As Oseman reveals in a tweet, "i [sic] created *heartstopper* to be an uplifting and hopeful story where a mentally ill character is on the path to recovery" (@AliceOseman). This decision to create a recovery-centered story avoids glamorizing mental illness or creating a narrative that is depressing to a point that disincentivizes active reader participation. This section will focus on how Oseman controls the development of Charlie's character and the greater pacing of the plot in order to facilitate the discussion of heavy topics in the comic's generally uplifting narrative.

#### *Characterization*

The development of Charlie's backstory is done primarily through organic means. Though flashbacks

are an important part of this process, they are always part of a conversation as opposed to a glimpse into a solitary mind. Ensuring the reader is no more aware of Charlie's inner state than Nick prevents the creation of dramatic irony. This is especially important in relation to the revelation of Charlie's anorexia. One of the purposes of this plot arc is to show the reader

how insidious an eating disorder can be. Were Oseman to reveal details of this issue to the reader but not to Nick, there would be an inappropriate suspense created as the reader waits for him to put the pieces together. Developing Charlie through his interactions with Nick and other characters helps prevent the dramatization of mental illness and creates a more authentic narrative.

Although Charlie's mental illness and sexuality are major aspects of his character, they are not his only defining qualities. Oseman develops Charlie as an outgoing, empathetic character. He is shown to care deeply about Nick, helping him figure out his sexuality and providing him a shoulder to cry on (Volume Two 36). Charlie is also shown to be strong in the face of challenging events. When Harry tries to pressure him into accepting an apology in front of a crowd of his peers, Charlie doesn't cave and instead tells him off (Volume Three 284). Demonstrating Charlie's ability to set and enforce boundaries affirms that his mental illness does not make him incapable of asserting himself independently. Aside from personality traits, Oseman gives Charlie interests including drumming and classic literature. These finishing touches make him a more concrete character as opposed to an abstract collection of traits. Building Charlie as a well-rounded character provides the "common ground" that McCloud argues readers can latch onto to build a more meaningful connection to the comic (65).

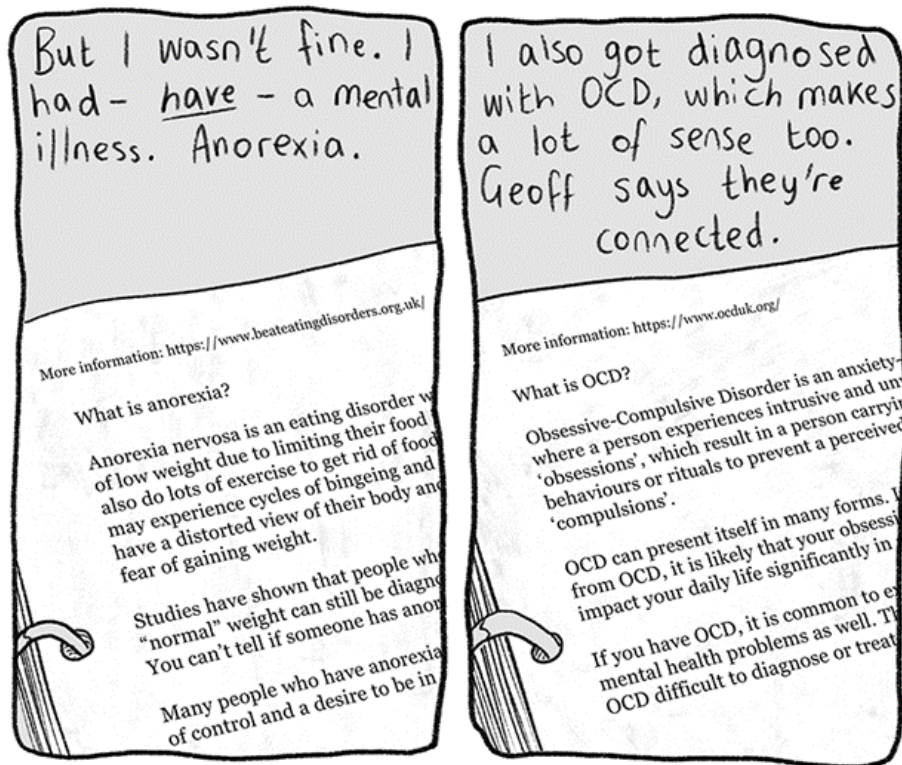


Figure 2 ("Heartstopper 6 - 8")

### Pacing

At its core, *Heartstopper* is a story of queer joy driven by a slice-of-life, will-they-won't-they romance. Having a main narrative driven by low-tension romance allows Oseman more flexibility with the pacing of the development of Charlie's mental illness. Her unevenly paced development in this regard communicates the

episodic and unpredictable evolution mental illness can take. Despite little changing in Charlie's surroundings as the comic progresses, his eating disorder still worsens to a dangerous point. Oseman carefully uses this plot movement to educate the reader about mental illness without losing *Heartstopper's* uplifting mood.

In keeping with her practice of avoiding dramatic irony around mental illness, Oseman conducts the early exposition of *Heartstopper* with no direct acknowledgement of Charlie's illness. Though the early chapters of the comic contain bullying incidents and Charlie's reactions to them, nothing outwardly suggests that he has an eating disorder. These incidents set the groundwork for the later parts of the series that explore proximal stressors in more detail. Deferring explicit discussion of mental illness to later volumes allows Oseman to focus on establishing the comic's main plot.

As the story progresses, Charlie's eating disorder worsens and Nick's awareness of it sharpens. Mental illness gradually moves to the forefront of the plot in Volume Three and Four. One technique Oseman employs to address mental illness more directly is using Nick's concern for Charlie's well-being to facilitate explicit dialogue about the topic. This approach allows the comic to explore the effects anorexia has on Charlie without specifically depicting them. Short expository conversations between the protagonist couple unveil a plethora of information about eating disorders and their effect on mental well-being. In a single scene, the reader



Figure 3 ("Heartstopper 4 - 27")

learns that Charlie understands that his dietary patterns are irrational, that he restricts eating to maintain control of something in times of stress, and that he dreads talking about this issue because he fears becoming a burden (Volume Three 216–20) (Figure 3). By revealing this through dialogue, Oseman avoids the ambiguity, low mood, and potential exploitation that could come with communicating Charlie's suffering by depicting him in a state of abject depression.

Eventually, Charlie's eating disorder develops to a point where continuing to have such an upbeat narrative would be an insincere representation of mental illness. Oseman chooses to write this portion of the story retrospectively. The time-skipping power this grants her allows her to show the reader enough of Charlie's suffering to demonstrate the damage unchecked mental illness can cause without showing so much as to exploit trauma for shock value. Through flashbacks originating from both of the protagonists' journals, the reader learns—but importantly does not see—that Charlie had a self-harm relapse that resulted in a trip to the emergency room and eventually a psychiatric hospital

(Volume Four 239). These flashback sequences only take up about 60 of the 350 pages in Volume Four. After they are over, the narrative returns to a structure similar to that found before: small moments that discuss mental illness among a larger, much happier story. This return to normalcy reinforces the idea that life goes on after a mental health crisis.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have investigated how Oseman explores minority stress and eating disorders through an uplifting, recovery-focused narrative. My analysis shows that *Heartstopper* accurately portrays the connection between sexuality and mental illness by specifically addressing the three core minority stress processes and the effect that they have on Charlie's well-being. By only depicting enough details of bullying events to facilitate developments about their effect on Charlie, Oseman avoids using trauma to inappropriately jar the reader. Distal stressors in *Heartstopper* provide a springboard for the exploration of proximal ones. To highlight how negative societal attitudes can be internalized, Oseman includes specific diction that is present in both bullying events and Charlie's inner dialogue when he has trouble eating. This relationship is further explored and validated in therapy sessions, which also serves to destigmatize mental healthcare by informing readers of what modern psychotherapy entails.

Ultimately, *Heartstopper* is a work of queer joy that centers around the love a gay couple shares. This love takes different forms throughout the series, from a rush of emotions on a first kiss to the tender concern Nick shows for Charlie's mental health. The overtly positive mood Oseman creates builds a special rapport with queer readers, a group with a notable lack of representation in feel-good media. Though Charlie faces adversity in his struggle with anorexia, his resiliency demonstrates that it is possible to live a happy life with mental illness. *Heartstopper's* portrayal of minority stress owes its success to Oseman's sensitive and accurate depictions of mental illness, as well as to the joyful narrative in which she communicates it.

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# Individuals with Disabilities in Higher Education

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An estimated one in eight U.S. college students have a disability (Lai, 2021, para. 8). This warrants the need for an understanding of the prevalence of individuals with disabilities in higher education. Research demonstrates a perceptible barrier to inclusion for individuals facing a disability, whether that be intellectual or physical. While some of the research that will be presented was conducted in the United States, many of the explanations of the barriers and inclusion policies will be taken from the guidance of higher education institutions in other countries, as their inclusion efforts are more advanced than those in the United States. Disability inclusion must be a priority of university institutions; advancement can be made through advocacy and awareness, federal updates, transition supports, and ensured access.

## Defining Inclusion and Disability

In order to fully understand the claims made by the passionate voices of those from these inclusion studies, it is incumbent to define inclusion and disability. According to Cate Rooney, a disabilities researcher from Australia, disability is the term used to describe any physical or intellectual range of barriers an individual faces (2019).

Further, disablism “is used to describe everyday practices that (unwittingly) perpetuate oppressive structures and deficit perspectives of people with disability” (Rooney, 2019, p. 39).

One of the greatest factors calling for an expansion of inclusivity is that society portrays disability as a disadvantage. This expansion is made more difficult when we fail to add it to discussions of diversity because then “the notion that diversity exists outside the realm of disability is perpetuated” (Scheef et al., 2020, p. 49). One of the

difficulties with a disability is that it’s not simple in how it manifests; rather, “disability is personal, complex and fluid. People are disabled by their bodies and by organizational and societal constraints” (Evans & Zhu, 2022, para. 5). Disability already takes an immense toll on the individual, and it’s magnified when they are placed in an environment that is not inclusive towards them. It is important to note terms like “ability” and “disability” because they represent the valuable notion that, “diversity not only focus[es] on culture, race, ethnicity, language, and sexual orientation, but also on different abilities” (Scheef et al., 2020, p. 50).

Another way that higher education institutions are showing negligence in their inclusion practices is



An individual reads a Braille document.

that the universities fail to include disabilities in their diversity mission statements. Scheef and peers state that “out of 80 IHEs mission statements, 59 (75%) referred to diversity with only 19% of it defining it in terms of ethnicity or race” (p. 51). It’s interesting that when universities aim for diversity, it’s all very selectively inclusive (Burke, 2020). There is an avoidance of intersectionality between disability and other areas of diversity; this leads to disability being disregarded in mission statements and



other places on campus. Mission statements that benefit higher educational systems may include many different parts: disability as one of many human differences, disability inclusion as an extension of social justice, disability as part of an inclusive campus, respect for diversity, and disability as part of a community (Scheef, et al., 2020, p. 54). A major improvement could be made by bridging these gaps and expanding mission statements to include disability as part of diversity. Diversity must encompass disability because individuals with disabilities are ostracized.

**Statistics and Research**

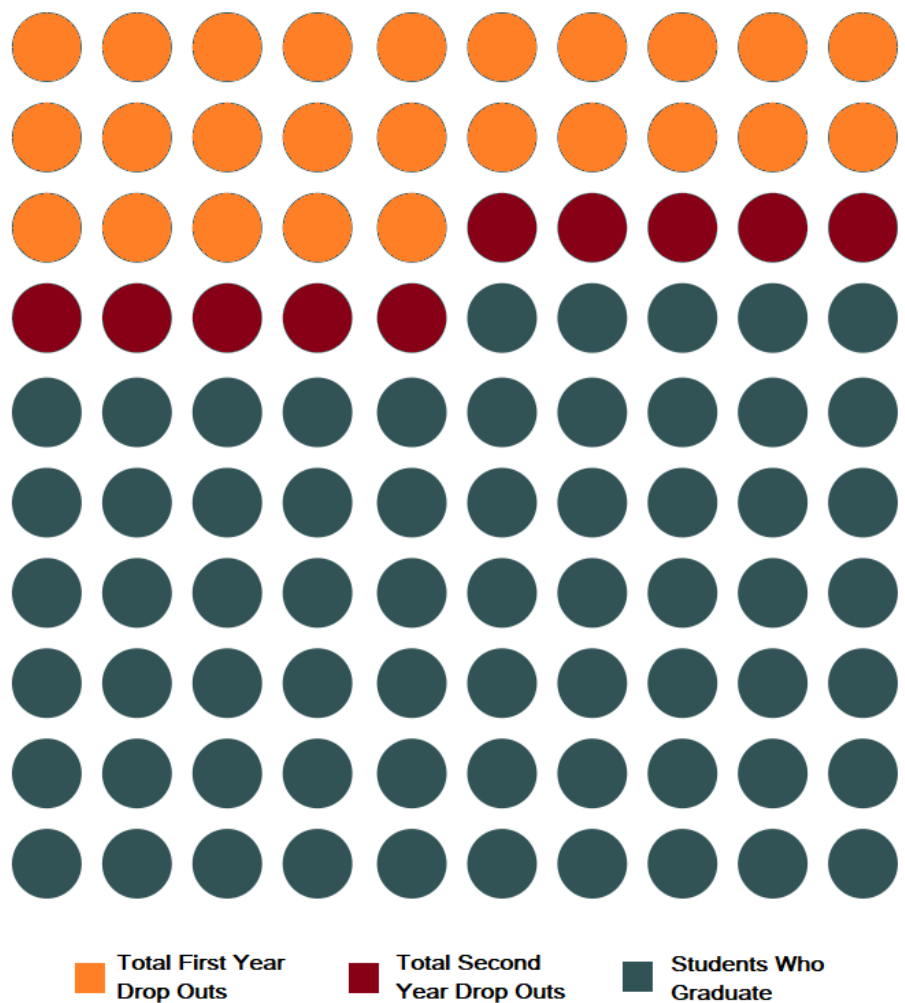
The wide-ranging data on individuals with disabilities points to an increase in students with disabilities attending college, but higher dropout rates among individuals with disabilities. “In fall 2019, 16.6 million students were enrolled in undergraduate degree-granting postsecondary programs [and] approximately 19% of [them] have a disability” (Campanile et. al., 2022, para. 1). While this number is high, it is encouraging as it shows that despite these students’ disabilities, they are still able to receive an education because of the basic inclusion policies that exist now. According to the American Council on Education, “if new students do not experience a sense of belonging within eight weeks of arriving at college, they will be at high risk of dropping out.... for first-time students with disabilities...25 percent [drop] out by end of year 1 and 35 percent [drop] out by end of year two” (Shaewitz & Crandall, 2020, “Creating a culture of inclusion” section). This data shows connection and belonging are two of the biggest factors that lead to the overall success and happiness of students starting college. If higher education doesn’t strive to include disability in its diversity standards, many students are at risk of feeling isolated and disconnected from their school, thus dropping out.

Because people who live with disabilities make up the largest minority group worldwide (Schumm, 2022), it’s imperative that universities are laying appropriate foundational inclusive frameworks

for colleges so all students, including those with intellectual disabilities, can learn and thrive (Corby et al., 2022). Dalia Sachs and Naomi Schreuer write, “the higher the level of education of people with disabilities, the better the chances for them to integrate into society in general, and into employment in particular, so that they might sustain themselves financially with dignity.” (2011, para. 2) The importance of keeping students with disabilities in higher education goes beyond broadening diversity on campus; it matters for people’s success in post-education life.

There is also a lack of individuals with disabilities in leadership positions, which is attributed as a factor causing the underrepresentation of disabled people in higher education. Even at a large institution like the University of California in San Diego, only 3.6 percent of tenured faculty consider themselves disabled (Burke, 2020). There isn’t much data available to show the number of

**Students With Disabilities Drop Out Rate**



Graphic illustrating drop-out rate of students with disabilities

educational leaders with disabilities, which communicates the message to students that “there are no leaders with disabilities in higher education and, more distressingly, that becoming a leader in higher education is not a path available to them” (Schumm, 2022, para. 14).

Jessica Campanile and fellow researchers sought to rank the disability inclusion levels at various top-funded US schools. Through analysis, they found that “the top 50 NIH-funded undergraduate universities have significant room for improvement on disability inclusion and accessibility, as 60% received a score of D or F on the University Disability Inclusion Score” (Campanile et al., 2022, para. 4). This very clearly shows that individuals with disabilities are facing less exposure and access to the same opportunities that nondisabled people face. But what barriers are causing this disparity?

### **Barriers to Inclusion**

Deirdre Corby and her peers believe that much of the research highlighting the inequities that individuals with disabilities face can be explained by a series of barriers to inclusion. One of them is “attitude barriers,” which refers to the way academic staff acts toward learners with disabilities (Corby et al., 2022). These individuals should not be treated any differently than a nondisabled person, but when they are singled out in the classroom due to their disability, they will inevitably feel excluded.

The perception from staff matters because “education for people with disabilities, like other forms of social provision, is shaped by popular perception and by providers’ understanding of the target population and its needs” (Hanafin et al., 2006, p. 436). A fix to this inclusion barrier could be just adjusting the lens through which students and staff view individuals with disabilities. It’s important to treat them with dignity like everybody else, to ensure that they feel as welcomed and accepted in academic settings as fully abled students.

Another factor worth mentioning is the physical-environmental barriers faced by disabled students. Sachs and Schreuer also describe the way that “Making computer workstations accessible to students with disabilities” would greatly decrease the “barriers they face in the promotion of equal opportunities in higher education and in employment” (2011, “Accessibility Of Computers And Information Technology” section). The built environment must accommodate everyone, from those with a range of physical disabilities to those with none.

Further, it is noted that “young people [with disabilities] themselves reported challenges in transitioning

from education to work, with problems in areas such as work placements, work readiness, securing and then retaining employment, in addition to low expectations of their capabilities” (Corby et al., 2022, p. 417). Some of these challenges stem from the “lack of positive societal expectations for these young people as experienced in primary and post-primary schools” (Hanafin et al., 2006, p. 437). It’s imperative that individuals with disabilities are encouraged by their peers and leaders so that they have a sense of empowerment going into the same opportunities that the typical student would have.

### **Steps to Inclusion**

Inclusion needs to be built from the ground up, so that everybody recognizes it as imperative, and everyone views it equally (Rooney, 2019). There are some practical steps we can take to better inclusion in higher education settings, such as giving students more time to accomplish their academic tasks (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011). In addition, “[academic] demands leave students with disabilities to cope with unequal opportunities to fulfill their academic capabilities and participate in rich academic and social experiences inherent in the student’s role,” (2011, “Students’ Academic Background” section) so it’s important to create space for these individuals to socially engage on campus.

The next step ties back to the underrepresentation of leaders with disabilities in higher education. Darla Schumm believes that “Policies become more inclusive and equitable when leaders center justice,” (2022, para. 14) so “it is important for students with disabilities to find role models who reflect their life experiences and realities” (para. 12). We as a society also need to be able to acknowledge implicit bias about disability and be strong enough to have conversations about the existing gaps of equity, inclusion, and justice (para. 16). Evans and Zhu add a layer to the discussion by noting that ensuring basic access, or essentially just making students and staff aware of the available supports, will go a long way (2022).

More of this issue was brought to light during the pandemic when most schools adjusted to an online program or curriculum. During the transition back to in-person learning, many students were left behind. Stephanie Lai writes that online instruction “allowed [students with disabilities] to read closed captions during lectures in real time, turn their cameras off when needed, and watch recorded lectures at home and at their own pace, among its benefits” (2021, para. 4). When this flexibility was removed, students that benefited from

the ease of online school were distressed. Lai quotes a student who says, “The pandemic showed me that environments can be made fully accessible in a virtual or hybrid environment with little cost to the school” (2021, para. 13). Taking notes from this student’s experience, it would aid inclusion expansion to make virtual learning available to every student. There shouldn’t be hoops to jump through for students with disabilities; they should be offered better access to learning.

Finally, changes should be made to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The Rehabilitation Act is a civil rights act that mandates the distribution of federal grants and programs to individuals with disabilities, and “was a tremendous step toward ending disability-based discrimination and promoting full rights of people with disabilities in education and employment settings” (Munoz, 2022). But because students with disabilities still face fewer opportunities and segregation, it’s evident that many of the promises of the law have not been fully realized (Munoz, 2022). Professor Ferri of Inclusive Education and Disability Studies says that 504 must provide guidelines for equitable education, serve as a tool for suffering students, and include stronger inclusion language (Munoz, 2022). Without specific direction and legal mandates to point colleges toward proper inclusion, it’s difficult for these institutions to accommodate disabled students to the necessary extent. These steps are a great starting point, paired with the aforementioned suggestions, towards creating a culture that makes every individual, disabled or nondisabled, feel that they belong in higher education.

## Conclusion

Including individuals with disabilities in higher education is a key step in moving towards a place of overall inclusion and diversity. Disability is an extension of diversity, so exclusion of people with disabilities should be addressed like any other form of prejudice. This topic is of utmost relevance because education should be something that everyone can receive, even if they have disabilities that make it more difficult. It is the responsibility of higher education institutions to compensate for the different challenges that people face. Their facilities and teachings should be accessible to all because everyone is deserving of opportunity, especially the opportunity to be educated.

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