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**ARTICLES**

**GIFTS INC (GREAT IDEAS FOR TEACHING STUDENTS IN THE CAROLINAS)**

# Carolinas Communication Association Officers (2024-2025)

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Michaela D.E. Meyer
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# Carolinas Communication Annual

**ARTICLES**

**GIFTS INC (GREAT IDEAS FOR TEACHING STUDENTS IN THE CAROLINAS)**

# Editorial Policy (2025-2026)

The *Carolinas Communication Annual*, the peer-reviewed, state/regional journal published by the Carolinas Communication Association (representing both North and South Carolina), is now accepting submissions for Volume 42. The annual features the study of communication broadly, and accepts manuscripts from any sub-discipline, genre or methodology represented within the communication discipline. We are particularly interested in manuscripts that feature diverse perspectives on any number of communicative practices, and especially encourage manuscripts addressing topics relevant to the Carolinas and surrounding geographic region. We are committed to working with authors at any career level – from first time submitters to seasoned writers.

The journal accepts three formats of original work: *research articles*, *research reports,* and *GIFTS*. Original **research articles** are commensurate with typical academic journal submission practices in communication, where an average piece may range 7000-7500 words in length. However, longer pieces that fall outside this range will be considered if the methodology warrants a lengthier piece (particularly with qualitative work). **Research reports** are designed for projects that can utilize more limited reporting, typically ranging from 3000-3500 words in length. These submissions should mirror journals such as *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* or *Communication Research Reports*. GIFTS submissions (Great Ideas for Teaching Students in the Carolinas) are typically 2000-2500 words in length and should offer practical skills and knowledge about teaching communication in various educational contexts (K-12, community college, 4-year universities, etc.) similar to those published in *Communication Teacher*. Submissions in all categories should follow the most recent edition of the APA citation style for references. All submissions to the annual may not be previously published or under consideration for publication at any other outlet.

The official call with specific submission details will circulate in winter of 2026. All questions related to submission should be directed to the editor Michaela D.E. Meyer at mmeyer@cnu.edu

# Editor's Introduction

Dear Members and Readers,

Greetings! I am honored to take on the role of Editor for the *Carolinas Communication Annual*. While my academic home is slightly north of the Carolinas, when I began my career at Christopher Newport University over 20 years ago, I looked for state and regional homes similar to what I'd experienced in graduate school. Virginia, however, is one of the few states that does not have a centralized state communication organization for various political reasons. So, I discovered the Carolinas Communication Association and started both attending the conference and submitting to the annual early on in my career. While my conference travel and attendance has waned, particularly through the COVID years and beyond, I still have great fondness for this organization as a place that gave me a home quite early on in my career.

In that vein, I am thrilled to present Volume 41 as the new editor of the *Carolinas Communication Annual*. This collection of original articles by early career authors contains incredibly inventive projects. David Rochaé and colleagues offer an insightful examination of the expectations individuals place on video calling in long-distance relationships. Their piece touts an incredibly diverse sample of intimate relationships, and thus, their findings significantly expand our understanding of the ways in which technology continues to integrate into everyday relational life. Ifeoluwatobi Odunsi and Shatakshi Semwal expand research on pregnancy loss by examining how public health messages are critical in breaking down the stigmas surrounding pregnancy loss, as well as championing women to advocate for appropriate maternal care. Sophia Keleno skillfully examines the public discourses related to the political stunts utilized to relocate border immigrants through a Burkean lens, ultimately illustrating the complexities of rhetorical form utilized in these discourses. And finally, Rachel Cabrel offers an innovative approach to teaching face negotiation theory. Taken together, these essays illustrate how early career scholars are moving the subfields of interpersonal communication, media studies, health communication, rhetoric and politics forward in new and exciting directions.

I truly enjoy editing, and I am looking forward to my role in the coming years. I hope you enjoy these pieces as much as I do.

Michaela D.E. Meyer
Professor of Communication
Christopher Newport University

# "We Expected to be Connected 24/7": Investigating Video Call Expectations in Long-Distance Relationships

**David J. Roaché , Anna Gusler & Margaret Burch**

*Contemporary long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs) often use video calling to remain connected, but they often face several challenges. This research sought to understand LDRRs' perceived interference during video calls and their behavioral expectations with their partners. One hundred and seventy-two adults in an LDRR responded to an open-ended survey about using video calls in their relationships. Thematic analysis indicated several sources of video call interference. Participants described irritations during calls related to their partners' distractions, as well as their verbal and nonverbal communication. Likewise, respondents reported irritations related to their partners' availability for video calls and issues related to technology. Participants also discussed their expectations for video calls regarding partners' attention, availability for video calls, video calling routines, and appropriate content for video calls.*

Geographic separation creates unique challenges for long-distance romantic relationships (LDRRs). However, the distance between romantic partners may not necessarily negatively impact relational quality (Sahlstein, 2010). Today, individuals in LDRRs can easily navigate and maintain their relationships due in large part to technologically-mediated communication (TMC; Wang et al., 2019). Video calling is one channel that LDRR partners may frequently use to maintain contact. Video calling has become increasingly prevalent among American adults. Four in 10 American adults have utilized video calling in new or different ways since the COVID-19 pandemic, including with close others such as friends, family, and romantic partners (McClain et al., 2021; Shufford et al., 2021). LDRR partners may take advantage of the advances in video calling to "mitigate the effects of decreased face-to-face contact" (Dargie et al., 2015, p. 198). Moreover, connecting with a video call on a smartphone while on the go (e.g., FaceTime) generates new opportunities to connect with an LDRR partner throughout the day.

Extant research suggests that romantic partners often develop standards for acceptable technology use in their relationships. Romantic partners may develop rules about expectations for response time to text messages, social media messages, and voice calls (Eden & Veksler, 2016). Such rules in romantic relationships may contribute to the pressure to constantly connect through mobile devices such as smartphones (e.g., Katz & Aakus, 2002; Kelly et al., 2017). Much of the scholarship on norms and rules for mobile technology in relationships emphasizes voice calls and texting (e.g., Hall & Baym, 2012). Less is known about LDRR partners' expectations for video calls in their relationships. Although recent evidence indicates that individuals in LDRRs utilize video calling more frequently than individuals in geographically close relationships (Holtzman et al., 2021), it is unclear what LDRR partners' video calling expectations are (and how they establish

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them). Using the Communication Interdependence Perspective (CIP; Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013), we seek to understand LDRR couples' relationship maintenance expectations for video calling. Thus, the current investigation explores why LDRRs develop expectations for video calling and what those expectations are. More specifically, this qualitative study elucidates the types of irritations about video calls LDRR partners experience and their expectations with the objective to minimize the frequency and mitigate the effects of these irritations.

**Technologically Mediated Relational Maintenance**

Relationship maintenance has been defined in a number of ways. It has been described as communication that keeps a relationship stable, consistent (i.e., intimacy, commitment), satisfactory, or in repair (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Relationship maintenance can be nonstrategic or strategic (Canary & Yum, 2015), although much of the scholarship emphasizes strategic maintenance behaviors (e.g., openness, positivity; Canary & Stafford, 1992). Research indicates that relational maintenance behaviors predict greater relational functioning, including commitment, stability, and satisfaction (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013).

Close relationship partners often maintain their relationships with a mix of mediated and face-to-face communication, and this applies to proximate and long-distance relationships (Caughlin & Wang, 2020; Eden & Veksler, 2016). Results from a study of romantic couples' mediated interactions over a week revealed that what partners communicated was substantively analogous to the extant maintenance literature (Laliker & Lannutti, 2014). Yet, there is evidence that relationship maintenance varies for long-distance and geographically close relationships (Caughlin & Wang, 2020; Johnson et al., 2008).

**Video Calling in Long-Distance Relationships**

Video calling is a prominent channel for relationship maintenance for LDRRs (Hertlein & Chan, 2020). Individuals in LDRRs report having more frequent and longer video calls (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). The frequency and duration of video calls likely explain why LDRRs engage in more dyadic relationship maintenance behaviors compared to geographically close partners (Goldsmith & Byers, 2020). Video calling also has a stronger effect on relational quality in LDRRs compared to geographically close relationships (Holtzman et al., 2021). Relational maintenance occurs through a variety of communication channels (e.g., text messaging, social media; for review see Caughlin & Wang, 2020). Yet, some relational maintenance behaviors that would have otherwise occurred face-to-face in geographically close relationships may occur during video calls between LDRR partners. On a video call, LDRR partners may share tasks (i.e., doing one's fair share of the work), such as planning their next visit. Alternatively, LDRR partners may discuss the future of their relationship (i.e., openness) and their commitment to their partner (i.e., assurances) while on a video call. These behaviors likely help maintain intimacy and satisfaction in LDRRs.

Video calls provide LDRR partners with a virtual space to maintain a sense of presence despite being separated by a great distance. Through video calls, LDRR partners may continue to preserve a sense of face-to-face interaction with temporary virtual

intimacy (Wilding, 2006). That perceived presence, in turn, may bolster perceived intimacy (Neustaedter & Greenberg, 2012). Partners may utilize video calling to simply "hang out" and spend time together, indicating the importance of establishing face-to-face presence (Suwinyattichaiporn et al., 2017). Likewise, video calling allows LDRR partners to reconnect, maintain their relationship while geographically separated, and resolve conflict (Hertlein & Chan, 2020). Video calls may also allow partners to feel an emotional connection to each other when they communicate in real-time with access to a full array of nonverbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, body language). Although cue-lean text messaging was associated with more satisfying LDRRs, video calling was associated with greater partner responsiveness (Holtzman et al., 2021). Thus, video calling may have an important function in LDRRs, particularly if individuals are seeking greater responsiveness and social presence from their long-distance partner.

However, LDRRs often face obstacles when attempting to maintain their relationship using video calls. Living in different time zones may prevent them from communicating in real-time on a voice call (Aylor, 2003), a constraint that also applies to synchronous video calling. With the increased use of video calling in close relationships (Shufford et al., 2021), it is important to explore how LDRR partners navigate using video calls when their communication is restricted due to physical separation. Because video calling is used frequently in LDRRs, research is needed to elucidate how partners can facilitate or interfere with individual or joint relationship maintenance goals. Toward that end, this study aligns with prior research on how romantic couples navigate the use of synchronous and asynchronous mediated communication in their relationships (e.g., Eden & Veksler, 2016; Foster Campbell, 2022).

**A Communication Interdependence Perspective on Video Calling**

Video calls may be a challenge for LDRR partners due to interruptions in patterns of interconnection present in relationships. The communicative interdependence perspective (CIP; Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013) is one of several theoretical perspectives on contemporary mixed-media relationships (Parks, 2017). The basic assumption of the CIP is that close relationship partners utilize multiple modes of communication (i.e., mediated and face-to-face communication), and "conversations across channels occur as part of ongoing discourse between relational partners" (Caughlin et al., in press, p. 23). The CIP asserts that interdependence exists through mutual influence between partners and across multiple modalities.

Rooted in interdependence theory, the CIP highlights the distinction between when a channel interferes with or facilitates relational communication (Caughlin et al., 2017). For instance, the use of a mobile device during an in-person interaction may be perceived as interference if a partner ignores their partner in favor of their device. In contrast, a mobile device can be used while communicating face-to-face to coordinate plans for later. Technology can be used in destructive ways, such as when an individual uses their phone to ignore their partner or to find evidence to help them win an argument (Sharabi & Dorrance-Hall, 2021). In general, more technology interference and destructive uses of technology during face-to-face interactions are associated with diminished relational quality in proximate (Pusateri et al., 2015) and long-distance relationships (Wang et al., 2019).

Although the frequency of video calling is associated with greater relational quality, LDRR partners may face scheduling and privacy issues (Hertlein & Chan, 2020). These issues underscore the distinction between moments when technology facilitates or interferes with communicative and relational goals (Caughlin et al., 2017). Video calling in LDRRs may facilitate togetherness when apart (Sharabi & Dorrance Hall, 2021). However, video calls also have the potential to generate new relational irritants when partners cannot find time to communicate in real time or when privacy concerns arise due to the presence of others.

How an individual uses technology may also interfere with a partner's goals during interactions. Research suggests that using technology during face-to-face interactions may be a distraction and diminish conversation satisfaction (Roaché & Caughlin, 2024). Given that video calling approximates face-to-face communication, LDRR partners may also engage in extracurricular activities on their devices during a video call conversation. Taken together, we speculate that some behaviors and actions during video calls interfere with the conversational objectives or conversation quality. Thus, we pose the following first research question:

**RQ1**: *What behaviors or actions interfere with the quality of video calls between LDRR partners?*

**Expectations for Relationship Maintenance During Video Calls**

LDRRs may have implicit and explicit agreements or expectations about communicating via technology. Such agreements are consistent with Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT; Burgoon, 1978), which explains how individuals have expectations for relational behavior from their partners. Of particular interest to the present investigation are prescriptive expectancies, or what individuals desire or prefer from their partner (White, 2022). Expectations for video calls are consistent with a communicative interdependence perspective, which has its roots in interdependence theory (Kelley et al., 1983). For instance, individuals in LDRRs may have expectations about perceived responsiveness from their partners while geographically separated (Holtzman et al., 2021). Some conflicting expectations can come from societal norms that have conditioned people to feel the need to always be connected (e.g., Kelly et al., 2017). However, LDRRs must establish expectations for video calls that benefit both partners. Although societal norms play a large role in the expectations set by partners, expectations may also be influenced by the relationship over time and through an understanding of one another (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2015).

Close relationships often develop behavioral expectations due to norms and rules. These standards articulate which unsavory behaviors should be avoided or which satisfactory actions should be performed during ongoing interactions or to maintain contact (e.g., Bryant & Marmo, 2012; Foster Campbell, 2022). For example, parents and children develop rules about acceptable technology use during family dinners (Hiniker et al., 2016). Romantic partners may likewise have rules that restrict contact with third parties while in the presence of each other (Miller-Ott et al., 2012). Evidence suggests that constraints or rules for technology use in face-to-face interactions are dissatisfying (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2015). However, rules about technology use may change over time and have the potential

to reduce interpersonal conflict (Foster Campbell, 2022). Consistent EVT (Burgoon, 1978), expectations may also minimize the frequency of problematic or irritating behaviors surrounding video calling in LDRRs. Toward that end, we forward the following:

**RQ2**: *What are the expectations for video calls for LDRR partners*?

**Method**

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants ($n$ = 172) currently in a LDRR were recruited from two sources. First, we recruited a purposive volunteer sample from Reddit. Specifically, we posted an advertisement on a subreddit for long-distance relationships with the permission of moderators (Reddit, 2023). Participants were also recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Adhering to standards commonly used in human subjects research on MTurk, participants needed to be at least 18 years old, reside in the U.S., have at least a 95% MTurk approval rating, and had completed at least 1,000 MTurk studies (Aguinis et al., 2021; Necka et al., 2016). Most of our sample identified as women (69.60%), with 26.30% identifying as men, and 1.20% identifying as non-binary. Five participants preferred not to disclose their gender identity. Most participants indicated that they were heterosexual or straight (53.80%), with 29.80% of participants identifying as bisexual and 5.80% as gay or lesbian (10.60% of participants preferred to self-describe their sexual orientation). Participants identified as White (65.50%), Asian or Asian American (11.90%), Hispanic/Latinx (10.20%), African American (5.60%), Other (2.30%), American Indian or Alaska Native (0.06%), and Native Hawaiian (0.06%). Seven participants preferred not to identify their racial background. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 64 ($M$ = 30.56, $SD$ = 10.48). They reported on relationships that had been long-distance for between one month to 10.08 years ($M$ = 1.87 years; $SD$ = 1.76 years).

The data presented in this study are part of a larger study investigating technology use in long-distance relationships. For the present study, participants answered open-ended questions about what irritated them about using video calls in their LDRRs and what expectations for video calls they established in their relationship. Thus, the following analysis is a qualitative investigation into how LDRR partners establish acceptable behaviors in light of irritating behaviors in LDRRs.

A combination of inductive and deductive coding was utilized for this data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Thomas, 2006). This approach enables researchers to explore themes expected from extant theory and research through deductive analysis (in this case, we expected themes from communicative interdependence). In addition, we accounted for the emergence of new themes that may not otherwise have been accounted for by extant theory and research (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

First, the second and third authors independently identified salient themes from a subset of the data, engaging in open coding (Williams & Moser, 2019). Second, axial coding was conducted. Through axial coding, we collectively determined, discussed, and agreed upon broader emergent codes in the data. After compiling the emergent codes into a codebook, the second and third authors applied the codes to the full dataset. While coding the full dataset, one additional theme emerged; we revised the coding scheme to reflect the new category. Once full coding was completed, we conducted selective coding when

discussing how to collapse codes into applicable themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). After the data were coded, the themes were discussed, and we selected and agreed upon exemplar quotations that best represented each theme.

**Results**

Participants described several behaviors that interfered with video calls in their long-distance relationships (RQ1), but they also indicated several explicit expectations to mitigate issues with video calls (RQ2). Considering RQ1, we identified themes of distractions, verbal and nonverbal communication during video calls, availability for video calls, and technology. For RQ2, we detected themes about expectations during video calls. Participants had expectations about attention during video calls, appropriate content of video calls, shared or parallel activities while on video calls, and the availability for video calls in their relationship. A minority of participants had no expectations for video calls with their LDRR partner. In the sections to follow, we first discuss video call irritations (RQ1) and then turn to video call expectations (RQ2).

**Video Call Irritations**

Many participants indicated that their chief complaint about video calls pertained to their partner's distractions during their video calls. Their partners' distractions were often due to multitasking during video calls. For instance, one participant lamented how their partner was constantly "playing on their phone" while they were talking. Another participant remarked that their partner would clearly be "browsing on the phone during the video call." For these individuals, having a partner performing activities on their phones while carrying out a synchronous video call conveyed that they did not feel like a priority to their distracted partner.

Distractions during video calls were also a product of multitasking with other technology. Participants mentioned that they were often annoyed by their partner's use of technology other than the smartphone on which they connected for a video call. More specifically, using other technology was a barrier to participants' attempts to seek attention from their partners and have an attentive ear. Some complained about their partner playing video games during their video calls, especially if their partner was paying more attention to the game than what they were saying on the call. Others identified browsing the internet (e.g., Reddit) or using a variety of other mobile applications, such as social media (e.g., Instagram), as frustrating. Certainly, there was a perception among some participants that their partners were unable to effectively balance a video call conversation while using other technologies.

For others, distractions were more about what was occurring in the background during video calls. Several participants described that their partner would be surrounded by others (which may have been attributed to being in a public venue for a call). "Randomly starting to talk to somebody else" is how one participant voiced their displeasure with the lack of attention they were receiving from their partner. Another participant remarked about how their partner would sometimes be "interacting with other people while on the call." In contrast, another was irritated by how they were "constantly interrupted by family/roommates" on their partner's end of the call. Others reported frustrations with

annoying noises, such as their partner chewing too loudly or the noises from doing the dishes while on a video call.

At a broader level, some mentioned that their partner did not dedicate sufficient attention to them during their video calls. There was some indication that a lack of focus from their partner or when their partner was not giving them their full attention was frustrating. What often precipitated the lack of perceived attention was the participants' partners performing some other task that prevented them from effectively listening. Indeed, participants commented on problems related to "split attention," "being interrupted," and "not being attentive enough at times." To these participants, a video call is an opportunity for a rich synchronous conversation, and any indications of divided attention were particularly dissatisfying.

Another theme that emerged from our data was the issue of availability for video calls. This theme included a perception that participants were putting in more effort than their partners to be "more available." Participants were frustrated by compromising more on their availability to meet the needs of their partner's schedule. In contrast, they did not perceive the same effort from their partner in return. One participant also remarked that their partner was "overly clingy" regarding video calls, and they requested to "spend every opportunity on a call." For this individual, they took issue with an expectation to be available for a video call throughout the day. Communication about availability to have a video call was also a problem for some participants. "Not giving a time frame on when we expect to be free (ie [sic] accidentally leaving the other person hanging)," remarked one participant about ineffective or nonexistent communication. LDRR partners also often struggled with the logistics of video calling. Numerous participants mentioned that the time differences made it difficult to schedule a time to talk on a video call consistently. Thus, making oneself available and communicating when someone is available for video calling while balancing time differences due to being long-distance was an issue for LDRRs.

Another common interrelated theme emphasized issues with verbal and nonverbal communication. For verbal communication, participants referred to issues with inappropriate topics for video calls, verbal expressions of negative affect, inappropriate humor, an unsatisfactory amount of self-disclosure, misunderstandings, or just not enough communication during video calls in general. One participant, for instance, discussed how they felt dismissed by their partner with a "lack of respect" for what they wanted to talk about while on a video call. Certain jokes and comments were irritating for some, with one participant suggesting that a joke had been taken "a bit too far." Some participants were irritated by verbal communication during video calls, while others had issues with nonverbal communication and behaviors. For some, silence from their partner was particularly uncomfortable during video calls. Others referenced their partner's problematic nonverbal expressions of anger (i.e., body language, facial expressions). One participant referenced how their partner sometimes frustratingly hung up "all of a sudden out of anger." Thus, this category referenced how the substance of LDRR partners' communication and their actions during video calls often were irritating.

A small number of participants reflected on how technology issues were irritating and a barrier to video calls. Poor internet connection or cellular service prevented these individuals from connecting to their partners on a video call. Others mentioned "no audio" or "video freezing" as issues with technology that made it challenging to hear or see their partner on video calls.

**Video Call Expectations**

Many participants reflected on expectations for attentiveness from their partner during video calls, perhaps as a response to a lack of attention in prior video calls. More specifically, LDRR partners agreed to minimize distractions, be attentive to their partners, and actively listen while on video calls. A central part of the expectation to remain attentive during video calls was to avoid scrolling on the internet or putting down work for the duration of their conversations together. In addition, some participants expected each other to have adequate equipment to ensure attention and listening. One individual mentioned that they and their partner "agreed to upgrade our headsets to deal with the early audio issues." Thus, there was an expectation to invest in products that would help improve listening and, in turn, the quality of their video call conversations. Perhaps the most important component of the expectation of attentiveness is that partners wanted to feel like they were a priority, with one participant commenting that they were expected to "fully focus on one another" while on their video calls.

A second common video call expectation for LDRR partners emphasized availability. This theme underscored the importance of the frequency and duration of video calls in their relationship. LDRR partners varied in their expectations for the frequency of video calls, ranging from "2 hours every 2 weeks" to as often as being on "FaceTime every single day," with some indicating that they agreed to often fall asleep together while on video calls. One participant shared that "we expected to be connected 24/7 just as we were in real life." For this individual and their LDRR partner, being constantly connected with regular video calls allowed their relationship to maintain a sense of normalcy despite the stress of being long-distance. An explanation for why participants set expectations for video call availability is to approximate regular face-to-face contact despite the distance, and this may be particularly salient for individuals who spent a high volume of time face-to-face before transitioning to a long-distance relationship. One participant thought it was essential to be available to be "together as much as possible on video chat so it's kind of like a normal relationship." Other participants agreed to regularly scheduled video calls even when busy, perhaps to convey how they prioritized the relationship. This theme also highlighted how some participants expected their partner to spontaneously video call them during their free time. Clearly, individuals varied in their expectations for availability for video calls.

Another salient video call expectation for LDRR partners focused on the content of the video calls. This theme references how participants set guidelines for appropriate and inappropriate topics for video calls. Some couples preferred the topic of conversation during video calls to remain "lighthearted," as one individual described, but other couples expressed that important topics required video calls. In fact, silence during video calls was sometimes preferred to avoid "forcing topics", as one participant remarked. LDRR partners certainly had guidelines for which topics were acceptable for video calls over communicating via different channels (i.e., texting).

Finally, participants had expectations for shared or parallel activities during their video calls. The expectation for routine activities included date nights, watching a movie together, playing an online game together, or eating dinner together. For example, some partners expected to engage in parallel work with each other while on a video call. This

refs to scheduling video calls with the understanding that they would be independently working; however, being on a video call allowed partners to maintain their sense of presence. Partners also worked together instead of alone; one participant said they would "work/study together" while on a video call. These expectations of sharing work and leisure activities on video calls benefited LDRR partners. One participant described the benefit of having built-in activities to share while on video calls, which helped to "build that feeling of being around each other in real life as much as possible."

**Discussion**

In this exploratory investigation, our goal was to understand how long-distance romantic relationship (LDRR) partners use video calls in their relationships. More specifically, we aimed to explore how LDRR partners grapple with irritations about video calls and their expectations for video calls to minimize irritations. We found that individuals in LDRRs are often irritated by scheduling issues surrounding video calls as well as specific behaviors by their partners during video calls (i.e., distractions, communication behaviors). LDRR partners established explicit expectations about video calls in their relationships in response to irritations. This finding is consistent with prior research on technology use in romantic relationships that identified how romantic couples had rules about how technologically-mediated communication is best used in their relationships (Foster Campbell, 2022). We identified expectations for attentiveness, shared or parallel activities, and the content of conversations during video calls. Likewise, we found that partners also set availability expectations for video calls in their relationship.

Ultimately, our data revealed that perceived interference due to distractions underscores the importance of partners approaching a level of undivided attention in video calls. Some participants noted parallel work on other tasks during video calls with their partner. However, more than any other theme, issues related to attention, distractions, and multitasking emerged in participants' remarks. Distractions took a variety of forms - including third parties in the background, conversations with other individuals during their calls, loud noises, and technology use - appraisals of these behaviors and expectations boiled down to issues of undivided attention (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2015). Partners who were distracted during video calls may have violated expectations, especially during important conversations. This finding is analogous to earlier findings that expectations for cell phone use during face-to-face interactions were less strict when just hanging out versus being on a date (Kelly et al., 2017).

The most frequent examples of distractions during video calls, as cited by participants, were related to technology use. For instance, many participants reported that their partner was often distracted by their smartphone during a video call. This was especially true if their partner used their smartphone in ways that did not complement the conversation (i.e., "playing on their phone"). This is consistent with recent data showing that over half of American adults in romantic relationships are sometimes or often preoccupied with their mobile phones (Vogels & Anderson, 2020). However, some participants in our sample reported that their partner was often distracted by other technology (i.e., browsing the internet on their computer, playing video games).

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, to our knowledge, this is the first qualitative study to explore issues of copresent device use irritations in synchronous

video call conversations between LDRR partners. Much of the existing scholarship emphasizes issues with technology use during face-to-face interactions (e.g., Courtright & Caplan, 2020; Roaché & Caughlin, 2024), whereas this investigation elucidates the ways technology may seemingly interfere with video calls that serve to approximate face-to-face conversation by increasing perceived presence in LDRRs (e.g., Suwinyattichaiporn et al., 2017). That is, LDRR partners on video calls are prone to a similar dialectical tension of autonomy and connection that is present in proximate relationships (Duran et al., 2011). Second, this investigation reveals that among LDRRs, it is important to acknowledge the variety of possibilities of technological interference (Roaché & Caughlin, 2024). Individuals were acutely aware of their partner's extraneous activities with technology during their video calls and often viewed those behaviors as irritating. Research on expectations surrounding cell phone use has revealed that romantic partners may set up rules about cell phone use (Duran et al., 2011; Miller-Ott et al., 2012). Our findings indicate that LDRR partners may similarly need to establish ground rules for video call conversations, especially when the conversations are serious as opposed to trivial.

A second key finding from these data revealed that participants were often irritated about issues related to availability for video calls with their LDRR partner and, in response, set expectations to curtail those irritants. Consistent with prior research that LDRR partners often face scheduling issues for video calls (Hertlein & Chan, 2020), participants in our study were bothered about video call availability in several ways. Some participants were frustrated by their partner's lack of availability for video calls. Other participants reported how their partner wanted to be perpetually connected on a video call. The expectation of being always available may be incongruent with individuals' goals, and this pressure is not unique to LDRRs. Close friends who communicate frequently through text messages may face increased pressures to be responsive to their friends, for instance (Hall & Baym, 2012). Individuals in LDRRs may likewise feel the pressure for perpetual contact (Katz & Aakus, 2002); participants who were frustrated by their "clingy" partners pushed back on this pressure to be "always on" and always available to their partners for video calls (Turkle, 2008).

Incongruent efforts by a partner to make themselves more available for video calls also frustrated participants, interfering with their ability to maintain a sense of presence with their partner. From a social exchange perspective (Stafford & Kuiper, 2022), individuals seek fair relationships in terms of rewards and costs. For example, the perceived inequity of work required to compromise free time for a video call was salient to participants. In our study, participants noted their partner's unwillingness to put in the effort to schedule routine or spontaneous video calls. In turn, this may be a source of dissatisfaction and friction in their relationship.

Generally speaking, LDRR partners in our sample expected undivided attention during video calls. This is consistent with geographically close romantic relationships that prefer avoiding additional activities during face-to-face interactions. These expectations aim to prevent dissatisfying behaviors such as partner phubbing, which occurs when an individual snubs their partner by using their phone (Roberts & David, 2016). Such behaviors may signal to an individual their partner's "decreased availability" (Allred & Crowley, 2017, p. 239).

LDRR partners also cited an exception to the rule of undivided attention from each other on video calls. Several participants folded into their expectation to be available for

video calls to include engaging in activities together. For some participants, these activities would be shared (i.e., date night, video games, studying). Others indicated that they would compromise full attention to engage in parallel work with each other during video calls. Thus, the expectation for undivided attention is not necessarily rigid for all relationships or for all activities. Indeed, participants engaged in parallel work were less rigid about an expectation for undivided attention. This is consistent with research on cell phone rules, where romantic couples may conclude that the context determines how a rule or expectation may be applied (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2017). Individuals in LDRRs in our data similarly determined specific situations where undivided attention is not always necessary.

Setting expectations about video call availability was a strategy some participants employed in their relationships. Many participants expressed a desire to establish a sense of normalcy despite the physical distance, and negotiating how frequently they connected on video calls was one such strategy. Although the frequency of video calling is associated with greater satisfaction in some LDRRs (Holtzman et al., 2021), our data suggest that how frequently LDRR partners use video calls is idiosyncratic and often negotiated. Yet, it is clear that availability expectations mirror earlier findings that partners often experience an autonomy-connection dialectic for cell phone contact (Hall & Baym, 2012).

Interestingly, a prominent theme for expectations also focused on the topics of conversations that are appropriate for video calls. Participants reported how they set up parameters for important topics or challenging topics (as opposed to trivial ones), ultimately determining whether a video call is an acceptable channel for the topics. This is analogous to what the Communication Interdependence Perspective describes as segmenting communication, which refers to reserving specific topics for certain communication channels (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). How frequently close relationship partners segment their communication to technologically mediated channels is associated with lower relational quality. Conversely, segmenting to face-to-face communication is linked to higher scores on indices of relational quality. The communicative interdependence perspective may explain these divergent findings. The observed differences may be due to how relational partners reserve important topics for in-person interactions. However, video calls for important conversations may be a requirement for LDRR partners who are geographically separated for long periods of time. Moreover, segmentation to technologically-mediated communication is not necessarily correlated with lower relational quality in long-distance partnerships (Wang et al., 2019). Although close relationship partners often report engaging in modality weaving (McEwan, 2021), these data underscore recent evidence that the extent to which specific communication topics occur across multiple modes of communication is negotiated (Foster Campbell, 2022). Our data preclude an analysis of the extent to which these expectations were negotiated by partners; however, the findings indicate that partners had explicit conversations about what preferred behaviors during their video calls (i.e., prescriptive expectancies; White, 2022). In addition, our data are consistent with Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT; Burgoon, 1978), highlighting another relational context where partners have expectations for technology use. Certainly, LDRR partners who set expectations to reserve video calls for specific conversation topics may be doing so to preserve the quality of their relationship and to avoid conflict escalation.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The findings from this study have important theoretical implications for the Communication Interdependence Perspective (CIP; Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). Previous research on the CIP suggests the interconnections (or lack thereof) result in varying effects on relationship and conversational quality in close relationships. The current study underscores the CIP's emphasis on factors during face-to-face conversations, such as technological interference (Roaché & Caughlin, 2024) and decreased availability (Allred & Crowley, 2017). Notably, we highlight how similar processes occur when partners are separated by geographic distance and must rely on video calling for the bulk of their relational maintenance. This finding is consistent with the extant literature on relationship maintenance in long-distance relationships. Although some individuals may prefer text messaging to share quick information, the ability to maintain a sense of presence through video calling is salient to long-distance partners (Hertlein & Chan, 2020). Many participants in our study shared their discontent with their partners' distractions during video calls, which often took the form of using other technology during their video calls. Sharabi and Dorrance-Hall (2021) explain that technology and face-to-face interaction are often "enmeshed" (p. 223). Our data highlight how different technologies may also become interconnected during an ongoing video call conversation. Extending previous research on technological integration (Wang et al., 2017), we offer clear examples of markers of destructive integration during LDRRs' video calls (e.g., playing a video game during a video call).

This study also has important practical implications for video calling in LDRRs. Respondents in this study reflected on how they set up expectations for what is appropriate and inappropriate for their video calls, ranging from availability to undivided attention during their scheduled video calls. Our data show that LDRRs hold prescriptive expectancies (White, 2022). That is, they have desired or preferred behaviors for each other during video calls. Romantic partners have expectations for relational maintenance, and meeting or exceeding those expectations is linked with greater relational satisfaction (Dainton, 2000). Expectancies may be influenced by relationship factors (e.g., relationship length and familiarity) and contextual factors (e.g., the communication context). Individuals in an LDRR may consider having expectation-setting conversations to prevent perceived interference and irritations. For partners who will soon be long-distance, these conversations may be important prior to the transition to long-distance when perceived interference is often heightened (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Ultimately, myriad factors likely influence individuals' perceptions of irritations during video calls. LDRR partners should consider having an open conversation about expectations and irritants during video calls, where much of their joint maintenance will occur.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Although our investigation offers valuable insights into how LDRRs navigate irritations surrounding video calls and set up expectations to manage their irritations, it is not immune to limitations. Our sample comprised individuals who were primarily female, Caucasian, and in a committed long-term relationship. Although the themes that emerged

from the data were similar for our purposive volunteer Reddit sample and MTurk sample, our findings should be understood considering these recruitment strategies and demographics. Future research should seek a more diverse sample, including individuals examining potential differences in perceived interference and expectations for video calls in casual and long-term relationships.

A second limitation of this study is that we do not know the relational implications of irritations or expectations for video call behaviors in LDRRs. Extant research suggests that the norms for multitasking with mobile technology during face-to-face interactions are shifting (e.g., Kelly et al., 2017). However, little is known about the societal norms for such behaviors during synchronous video calls and the impact a violation of those norms may have on LDRRs. Future research should investigate the frequency and effects of video call irritations on relational quality in LDRRs.

**Conclusion**

The results from this exploratory study contribute to research on how individuals in long-distance relationships perceive interference in their video calls with each other. Our data also reveal that partners establish best practices in their relationships to minimize the magnitude and frequency of moments of interference with their video calls. Toward that end, this study adds to scholarship on how close relationship partners navigate how technology may be best used in their geographically distant relationships.

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# Lessons from the HEAR HER Campaign: A Qualitative Content Analysis of the Narratives Used to Promote Prenatal Health Care

**Ifeoluwatobi A. Odunsi & Shatakshi Semwal**

*To address the alarming trend of maternal mortality, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) initiated the HEAR HER campaign, aimed at disseminating potentially life-saving messages regarding maternal health. We examined the narratives used in this campaign to more closely assess the descriptive elements that contribute to narrative persuasion for pregnant women. Using Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) theory, this study examined the contribution of HEAR HER campaign narratives in promoting maternal health awareness and positive pregnancy health behaviors. We examined the story approaches in addressing maternal health concerns by examining campaign transcripts, and we learned which ones provide explanations for the implications for effective health promotion initiatives. Emergent themes include (a) maternal health complications, (b) advocating for attentive maternal support, (c) unconscious bias in healthcare, (d) building trust for effective communication in maternal care, and (e) cultural and societal influences.*

The maternal mortality rate in the United States has worsened over the past five years, and health organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) develop campaigns aimed at reducing adverse pregnancy outcomes for women in the country. In a recent 2020 maternal mortality report, the CDC reported 861 women to have died from pregnancy-related deaths, an increase from the 754 in 2019 (Hoyert, 2022). World Health Organization (2004) defined maternal death as:

> The death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days (about 1 and a half months) of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the duration and the site of the pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management, but not from accidental or incidental causes.

The CDC developed and launched the HEAR HER campaign to raise awareness and share potentially life-saving information about urgent warning signs that can help prevent maternal deaths during pregnancy (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022a). This campaign incorporated the use of narratives from celebrities like Allyson Felix, Dr. Wanda Barfield, and other individuals to promote preventative prenatal care behaviors. Health narratives have been found to significantly persuade individual's health behaviors (Ballard et al., 2020). The narratives in this campaign were distributed across various digital media platforms such as social media (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter),

YouTube, websites (with links to micro websites available on the CDC campaign page) and digital advertisements (Behm et al., 2022). HEAR HER campaign digital pages recorded over 390,000 unique visitors and 180 million impressions (the number of times unique content are displayed on viewers screens) across digital platforms which demonstrates the campaigns wide reach across diverse audience (Behm et al., 2022). The campaign's wide reach, repetitive exposure to the campaign content and its focus on pertinent prenatal issues affecting both athletes and everyday women prompt a closer examination of why it resonates so strongly with individuals. Thus, our paper aims to explore how narratives, as used in the HEAR HER campaign, function both as descriptive tools to increase awareness of maternal health issues and stimulants for positive health behaviors among pregnant and postpartum individuals and their support networks.

**Preventing Maternal Health Crises Through Awareness and Advocacy**

Some of the warning signs for pregnant individuals highlighted in the HEAR HER campaign include: (a) a headache that does not go away or worsens over time, (b) dizziness or fainting, (c) changes in vision, (d) a fever of 100.4˚F or higher, (e) extreme swelling of the hands or face, (f) thoughts of self-harm or harm toward the baby, (g) trouble breathing, (h) chest pain or a rapidly beating heart, (i) severe swelling, redness, or pain in a leg or arm, (j) severe abdominal pain that does not subside, (k) severe nausea and vomiting, (l) decreased or absent fetal movement during pregnancy, (m) vaginal bleeding or fluid leakage during pregnancy, (n) heavy vaginal bleeding or discharge after pregnancy, and (o) overwhelming fatigue (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022c). Experiencing some of these symptoms may lead to pregnancy severity or birth complications; therefore, it is essential for mothers to recognize and respond to urgent maternal warning signs that may indicate potential adverse health outcomes. Health campaigns such as this may serve as effective persuasion strategies to increase motivation for pregnant women to advocate for their health concerns when and where necessary (Perrier & Martin Ginis, 2018). The HEAR HER health campaign utilizes messages created by mothers and maternal health professionals as motivators for mothers to better advocate for their maternal health concerns.  Furthermore, this campaign beckons on mothers' social support networks to assist with advocate for themselves when something does not feel right in their bodies during pregnancy and encourage healthcare professionals to be more attentive to their patient's needs.

To reduce the likelihood of pregnancy and postpartum health complications that lead to death, the CDC lists warning signs for pregnant women, postpartum mothers, and their social support networks to pay attention to when they occur. The objectives of the HEAR HER campaign are to (a) increase awareness of pregnancy-related complications, (b) empower people who are pregnant and postpartum to speak up and raise concerns, (c) encourage support systems to engage in important conversations and (d) provide tools for pregnant and postpartum people and healthcare professionals to better engage in lifesaving conversations. These messages target pregnant women, their social support networks, and healthcare professionals who interact with pregnant and postpartum women. The CDC engages multimedia channels and different types of prevention messages to promote precautionary behaviors during and after pregnancy. In this paper,

our goals are to analyze the content of the HEAR HER campaign narratives and identify narrative elements that are relevant for creating greater regard for maternal health promotion campaigns. We discuss the threat of maternal mortality in the U.S. as a call for stronger maternal health promotion, highlight the role of narratives in such efforts, and propose Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) theory as a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of narratives in promoting maternal health and well-being, including relevant literature on the HEAR HER campaign.

**Maternal Mortality and the Critical Need for Maternal Health Awareness**

Various social determinants of health impact pregnant women. Social determinants of health is defined as "the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age—are significant drivers of disease risk and susceptibility within clinical care and public health systems" (Crear-Perry et al., 2021). Previous studies have examined obstetric and non-obstetric causes of maternal mortality, some of which are associated with social determinants of health (Callaghan, 2012; Huang et al., 2023). These studies demonstrate that women belonging to minority racial groups are more severely impacted by poor social conditions than women in the majority representing racial groups. Maternal mortality occurs at differing rates across various racial groups and serves as a key marker for maternal well-being.

The unhealthy social conditions and lifestyle in which pregnant women nurture their unborn impact the prenatal health of women (Fathnezhad Kazemi et al., 2017). Social conditions and unhealthy behaviors can lead to stressful biomarkers of an unhealthy pregnancy or poor maternal health outcomes. Some lifestyle behaviors that impact health-promoting behaviors among pregnant women are a change in food consumption, diet, and self-care (Higgins et al., 1995). Also, some attitudes towards pregnancy influence the maternal health outcomes of a pregnant woman. Some examples include feeling strong, a lack of urgency about their health, prioritizing the child's health (Edvardsson et al., 2011), and the pregnant woman's pre-existing health conditions (Viau et al., 2002) have created the need for and conditions necessary for an increased advocating of maternal health promotion behaviors.

When creating the HEAR HER campaign the CDC employed various campaign resources that include news media resources, videos, social media, shareable graphics, posters & handouts, microsites, and content syndication (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022b). The campaign utilized diverse types of evidence, such as statistics and narratives (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022); but it primarily relied on narratives from pregnant women as a key strategy to help others recognize maternal health warning signs, encourage social support system members to provide the needed support for pregnant women.

**HEAR HER Campaign Narratives' Contribution to Maternal Health Promotion**

The world is a collection of stories that individuals select to create a meaningful life (Fisher, 1984). Storytelling, as a narrative medicine technique, offers multiple pathways for improving health, facilitating healing processes (Kreuter et al., 2007; Land, 2007; Lee et al., 2016; Simpson-Gervin, 2016; Yakubu, 2019), and enhancing the health

of marginalized populations (Houston et al., 2011; Murphy et al., 2013). Fisher (1984) posited that "humans are essentially storytellers" (p. 8), emphasizing the universal nature of storytelling as a means of making sense of experiences. Some studies have explored how narratives shaped teenage pregnancies (Lesser et al., 1998), and the educational use of pregnancies in the training of medical professionals (Yu et al., 2019). This example illustrates how a single story can resonate with individuals who identify with its characters or events, highlighting the vital role of storytelling in health interventions like public health campaigns. Therefore, to further understand how these in the HEAR HER narrative's function and influence both individual and collective health behaviors, we rely on Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) theory as an explanatory framework for assessing the meaningfulness of the campaign messages disseminated.

**Communicated Narrative Sense-Making**

In exploring the deeper impacts of storytelling on health and well-being, the Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals and communities use narratives to make sense of their experiences. Pulling from narrative theory, the CNSM theory conceptualizes narratives as a larger framework that consists of small stories, accounts, and memorable messages (Kellas, 2010). CNSM examines the content and process of stories concerning how individuals make sense of their experiences.  This study uses CNSM to examine the content of stories about improving maternal health and well-being (Kellas, 2017). CNSM identifies three heuristics that characterize storytelling about well-being: retrospective storytelling, interactional storytelling, and translational storytelling (Kellas, 2017). This study follows two propositions related to the retrospective storytelling heuristic in CNSM. The first proposition proposes that meaningful stories disclose the meaning-making process, consequences, values, and beliefs among persons and in relation to others (Barney & Yoshimura, 2021; Kellas, 2010, 2017). The second proposition proposes that positively framed retrospective stories (e.g., redemptively, prosocial, affectively positive, characterized by high levels of agency, coherently) are related to individual and relational health and well-being (Kellas, 2017).

Retrospective stories focus on key content present in recalled stories about life-defining events in one's life. Retrospective stories are important for understanding how individuals make sense of difficult experiences (Charvat et al., 2021). CNSM is founded on narrative theorizing structures to create plot, characters, scenes, and settings, that describe and create meaning about various life experiences. For instance, Barney & Yoshimura (2021) investigated the use of narratives to make sense of the bereavement process of cleaning out a loved one's closet by emphasizing the processes/stages of mourning via the appraisal of locations and objects that a deceased loved one formerly inhabited.  Recalling stories in retrospect helps people make sense of difficult lived experiences, and as a result, may provide a framework for dealing with similar difficult situations in the future.

Concerning pregnancy and managing maternal care, CNSM has been useful in exploring how pregnant women make sense of their difficult experiences. For example, Charvat et al. (2021) identified some themes about the meaningful stories of how pregnant women made sense of their pregnancy during COVID-19. Stories have been

found to build resilience (Preis et al., 2020), and mobilize social support (Bandura, 2001). Thus, retrospective stories have previously been discussed in connection to improving the well-being of individuals. Thus, the following research question is posed:

**RQ1**: *How do narratives, as utilized in the HEAR HER campaign, contribute to increasing awareness of maternal health issues and promoting positive health behaviors among pregnant and postpartum individuals and their social support networks?*

**Method**

In this study, we examined transcripts of narrative testimonies used in the HEAR HER campaign (https://www.cdc.gov/hearher/index.html). These narratives consist of testimonies given by mothers and maternal health professionals in the HEAR Her campaign. At the time of this analysis, we identified a total of 13 transcripts uploaded to a publicly available CDC website, seven of which were provided by mothers who experienced pregnancy difficulties, and eight transcripts provided by healthcare professionals to promote prenatal care. All interview video scripts, and campaign messages were transcribed on the CDC website and on their YouTube channel (with comments turned off preventing public interactions). Alongside the narrative materials used in this campaign are other promotional materials such as news media resources, videos, social media, shareable graphics, posters and handouts, microsites, and content syndication (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022b). We curated these data for coding and data analysis. The messages analyzed for this paper consisted of narratives of mothers who had experienced some form of difficulty during pregnancy and birth. We analyzed the stories of health professionals and their experiences with women who experienced difficult pregnancies.

The participants in this campaign did not disclose their ages. All the names presented in this study are the parents' real names as presented in their transcripts and narratives. The demographic details of the publicly available information are represented in the tables below. The first table (Table 1) details the names and number of children the participants in the HEAR HER campaign materials have. Most of the mothers' testimonials mentioned that they had experienced some sort of difficulty during their pregnancy which included but were not limited to preeclampsia, chest pains, high blood pressure, kidney failure, hemorrhaging, headaches, difficulty breathing, fainting, and dizziness among others.

**Table 1:** Mother Participants in the HEAR HER Campaign

| Name | Number of Children | Profession |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Allyson Felix | 2 | Olympic athlete |
| Eleorra | 4 | Not disclosed |
| Kylie | 1 | Not disclosed |
| Lindsay | 4 | Not disclosed |
| Sanari | 2 | Not disclosed |
| Valencia | 1 | Air Force member |

Additionally, the HEAR HER campaign featured testimonies from medical specialists urging moms and other medical professionals to support expectant mothers; Table 2 provides publicly accessible information about these participants.

**Table 2:** Healthcare Professional Participants

| Name | Professional Role |
| --- | --- |
| Dr. Jenna White | Emergency and EMS Physician |
| Dr. Wanda Barfield | Director, CDC's Division of Reproductive Health |
| Dr. Laura Riley | Maternal-Fetal Medicine Specialist |
| Dr. Deborah Taylor | Core Faculty, Community OB/GYN Residency Program |

We examined the data (interview transcripts) using phronetic iterative analysis and thematic analysis (Tracy, 2019). For this process, the first author engaged in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the selected data corpus (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). During this process, she utilized six clear steps to conducting an iterative process of thematic analysis which includes (a) familiarizing oneself with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report by locating exemplars (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To familiarize herself with the data, the first author read each transcript, noting ideas related to order, content, and narrative features. She set aside three transcripts to verify transferability, then organized all transcripts by participant type (mother or health professional). This is to ensure referential adequacy by archiving a second part of the data set until the first set of the data is analyzed and comparing the second part with the analysis of the first data set (Scharp & Sanders, 2019).

The second author joined in the secondary process by comparing and identifying similar themes found within the data which encouraged identifying themes that may be similar or different from the mothers and the health professionals' experiences. We identified themes emerging themes, by asking ourselves, "what counts as a theme?" We then selected themes that reflected salient aspects of their stories in a patterned way outside of the frequency or commonality of the themes across all participants (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). Furthermore, the second author conducted a third round of thematic analysis to further refine the themes and added two themes — advocacy and cultural influence. These new themes were critical in capturing the broader social and cultural context of maternal care narratives.

Upon completing the thematic analysis, we engaged in qualitative verification to ensure that the data was transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). Additionally, we engaged in self-reflexivity as a process of transparency and dependability in which the process denotes the thematic maps related to the emerging themes. We then engaged in researcher triangulation, by using intercoder reliability, to confirm the validation of the study and the findings that emerged. The peer debriefing process validated the interpretations and supported the credibility and confirmability of the findings, thus supporting their utility in informing maternal healthcare practice and policy. The final themes were reviewed in a collaborative peer debriefing process to validate the interpretations and ensure that the findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences as represented in their narratives. This process helped to confirm the

credibility and confirmability of the findings, supporting their potential utility in informing practice and policy in maternal healthcare.

**Findings**

The findings generated in this study are closely related to CNSM and the role of retrospective storytelling in promoting positive health behaviors and outcomes. The coding process was thorough, starting with detailed initial coding of each transcript followed by a structured approach to grouping codes into overarching themes. The thematic analysis specifically focused on identifying five overarching themes: (a) maternal health complications, (b) advocating for attentive maternal support, (c) unconscious bias in healthcare, (d) building trust for effective communication in maternal care, and (e) cultural and societal influences. Each theme was cross-checked against the initial codes to ensure alignment and representativeness. To enhance the robustness of the coding process, thematic maps were developed to visually represent the relationships between codes and themes, and these maps were continuously refined as new insights emerged from the data.

*Maternal Health Complications*

The central focus of the health campaign was identifying symptoms of pregnancy complications, and the stories mainly reflected such conditions. Participants, especially the mothers followed a redemptive pattern by first stating their pregnancy troubles and proceeding to discuss how they reconciled their troubles through information seeking. This theme mainly highlighted some of the health conditions that they experienced during their pregnancy which include preeclampsia, complications related to pregnancy-induced symptoms, abscess on the uterus, hemorrhage during labor, kidney failure, complications leading to emergency c-sections, and difficulties accessing appropriate healthcare. For instance, Allyson said,

> Camryn (Allyson's child) was in the NICU for a month after she was born. I stayed in the hospital for a while, and I had some complications that came along with preeclampsia. It was just a really scary, tough situation. But I feel so blessed that I came out on the other side of it. There are so many women who do not walk out of the hospital. They are not there to raise their children.

This excerpt signifies the difficulties that result from the onset of maternal warning signs that women may experience when they are pregnant. Additionally, this theme represents stories that started with the participant lacking knowledge/ awareness about negative maternal symptoms. Maternal complications were considered troubles in the participants' lives that were also met with some demonstration of agency or an advocacy call to encourage engaging in active preemptive maternal care behaviors.

*Advocating for Attentive Maternal Support*

A key finding was the emphasized importance of attentively listening to pregnant women in distress. Furthermore, this theme consists of messages that encourage women not to discard warning symptoms as a normal part of their pregnancy journey. Furthermore, health professionals are encouraged to be more attentive to their pregnant patients and advocate for them where needed. For instance, Valencia shared the

difficulties she experienced with her maternal health professional and the kind of support she received from her primary physician. She said,

> I talked to a lot of different people. I tried to talk to my doctor. I even talked to my primary care physician, who's not even my OB, just to get information, did a lot of research and a lot of Googling. I was scared. I was scared a lot of the time because I just felt like no one heard me. I was having headaches. I would be dizzy a lot. I would experience a lot of pain. And I just knew things weren't normal. My primary care doctor advocated for me a lot to switch my doctor.

This theme also encapsulates the entrenched character of health professionals as stakeholders in the care delivery process of their patients. One of the mothers', Lindsay, experienced her difficulties with the second pregnancy, even though during her first pregnancy she did not experience complications. Some of the stories demonstrated how pregnant women advocated for themselves and further encouraged women in distress to speak up when they experience any form of discomfort by seeking proper maternal medical attention. Lindsay's encouragement for self-advocacy was reflected in her advice:

> My advice to women: you know your body better than anyone else in the world. You are your number one advocate. Be proactive about stuff. If you feel something is a little off, go check. Go make sure. Talk to somebody, express how you feel. It could be nothing, and if it is great, but if it's something serious, it's better to catch it in the beginning than just to think it's normal pregnancy and everything's going to be okay, and it was something that could have been prevented.

The exemplars from this theme emphasize the importance of pregnant women (re)claiming agency in the medical space especially when communicating about their symptoms to the health professionals. Lindsay's advice on seeking care despite these dismissals illustrates the critical role of self-advocacy in ensuring timely and appropriate medical interventions. Lindsay's first pregnancy was relatively uncomplicated compared to her second, during which she experienced severe complications. This contrast has informed her advocacy by highlighting the unpredictable nature of maternal health, thereby reinforcing the need for vigilance and proactive, inclusive advocacy efforts. Advocacy for maternal health should not be the sole responsibility of pregnant women, but rather a collective effort involving all relevant stakeholders. Engaging diverse actors at both the community and policy levels—where personal narratives can serve as compelling evidence—has the potential to significantly influence and reform maternal healthcare policies and practices. For instance, Allyson Felix emphasized the importance of persistence in voicing concerns:

> I really want women just to be aware... to be persistent about anything that does not feel normal, because I know how important it is. I remember at one point the doctor rushing in and saying 'You know, we cannot wait any longer. We are going to have to rush you in for an emergency C-section.' You know, I am scared. I'm terrified, but I'm not really concerned about myself. I'm just worried about this little, tiny baby who, you know, is not ready to enter this world yet. All I was thinking is I want a healthy baby. I didn't imagine, you know, not even being able to be in the same room as my daughter and not being able to hold her until even the next day.

This reflects a broader need for women to trust their instincts and communicate their experiences, even in the face of dismissive or minimizing responses from healthcare providers. This theme highlights the significance of attentively considering the concerns expressed by pregnant women, both by their healthcare providers and their social support networks.

*Tending to Unconscious Bias in Healthcare*

This theme was characterized as raising awareness and a call-to-action to preemptively address unconscious bias that may occur in a healthcare setting. This theme mainly described taking active steps to reduce unconscious bias and not assuming that bias trainings are on-off trainings that automatically erase subtle and unconscious forms of bias. Dr. Taylor, a health professional, explained the outcome of attentive and conscious efforts to reducing bias. Dr. Taylor had this to say:

> I went through this implicit bias training two years ago, and really had the opportunity to say, 'Even though this is really important to me, and I think I'm doing a great job, there is room and ways for me to do better.' ... I had had a patient who had come to my office and was very upset. She had thought she was getting an ultrasound, and I had said she didn't need one. I said, you know, 'Hey, I looked at your records. I don't think we need another scan. I think we got the information we need about your pregnancy.' And she said, 'Well, that's not what I'm worried about.' And I said, 'Oh, okay. Tell me what you're worried about.' And so, we talked about her bleeding and got through it. And she actually did end up getting another ultrasound.

This comment by Dr. Taylor highlights the importance of implicit bias training and why it is important to listen fully without making assumptions. Furthermore, this theme emphasizes the harmful effects of unaddressed unconscious bias and underscores the importance of actively addressing such bias to reduce negative outcomes for patients. Dr. Jenna White, an Emergency and EMS Physician, stated that:

> We all have unconscious biases, and it's important that we don't try to tell ourselves or anyone else for that matter that we don't have biases, but rather that we decide that we will do what it takes to minimize the potential harm that these biases can cause. And we do that by taking both individual responsibility for addressing the potential for bias, but also by building systems within our healthcare delivery model that make it easier for us to do the right thing for the patient no matter what.

This finding touches on the presence of unconscious biases in healthcare and the need for healthcare providers to recognize and address them to ensure equitable care for all patients. This theme also addressed how reducing unconscious bias may improve cultural sensitivity toward diverse patients of diverse cultural backgrounds. Addressing unconscious bias is instrumental in building trust between patients and their health providers and/or their social support systems.

*Building Trust for Effective Communication in Maternal Care*

The findings for this theme identified the highlighted role of fostering trust between pregnant women and their healthcare providers. Moreso, this theme emphasized the importance of women trusting themselves when they experience discomforting

symptoms during their pregnancy terms. The healthcare providers emphasize the importance of earned trust in health care delivery process of managing a patient's pregnancy experience and outcomes. For example, Dr. Wanda Barfield, the Director of CDC's Division of Reproductive Health, explained the crucial role of trust in maternal care by stating:

> I think that it really is important that we emphasize how important it is to build trust and for us to also understand and really understand personally our own implicit biases and how we can overcome them. But just giving the opportunity to really listen to our patients and really Hear Her.

Trust is not only engendered in the interpersonal context of patient-doctor interactions but must be earned with pregnant women patients. Trust in prenatal healthcare providers contributes to pregnant women's motivations to adhere to prenatal care recommendations prescribed by their primary care providers (Evans, 2016). Evans' (2016) study emphasizes that patient adherence is more likely when healthcare professionals actively listen. Similarly, Dr. Barfield advocates for clinicians to address their own implicit biases through intentional listening practices. Building on this, Dr. Taylor's example in the previous theme illustrates how listening not only helps identify and interrupt implicit bias but also contributes to reducing medical errors.

Trust in the primary care provider is not the only one that matters, but trust in oneself to advocate during prenatal care visits is equally as important. One of the mother participants, Sanari, said this about the relevance of patients trusting themselves:

> So, even if those around you aren't listening or they're trying to pacify what you're feeling and telling you this is just normal, trust your gut and know that it's not normal if you don't feel it's normal. And tests may come out, you know, to say that it's perfectly fine, but you'd rather err on the safe side and know that you're okay.

Nurturing trust in self was discussed as relevant for advocating and building the patient's agency in healthcare contexts. To build trust with patients, healthcare professionals must listen attentively to the concerns that women share about some of the difficulties they experience. Therefore, it is crucial for healthcare providers to actively listen to and validate patient concerns, creating an environment where women feel comfortable voicing their worries without fear of dismissal.

*Cultural and Societal Influences*
This theme explores how cultural beliefs, societal norms, and contextual factors influence maternal health experiences and outcomes. It examines disparities in care that arise from cultural misunderstandings, language barriers, or societal stigmas, and highlights the need for culturally sensitive care approaches. This theme also addresses the role of community norms and societal support structures in shaping maternal health behaviors and access to care. As from the transcript, Sanari's story illustrates how societal expectations can affect a mother's ability to advocate for her health. After experiencing severe pain and being repeatedly told by healthcare providers that her symptoms were "just gas," Sanari's persistence in seeking care underscored the broader societal challenge of being dismissed or not taken seriously by medical professionals. Sanari explained:

> I felt like I didn't think that this was normal. I don't think that I should be feeling like this, you know, this long. And I mean after taking -- and after taking all of the

medications that they're giving me, you name it, Gas-X, suppositories, pain medicine, morphine, and I'm still having these pains. There -- this can't be gas, I'm convinced.

This narrative highlights the cultural expectation that women should endure pain and discomfort during pregnancy without questioning it, often resulting in delayed or inadequate medical interventions. It underscores the importance of validating women's concerns and the need for culturally competent care that respects and responds to a patient's reported experiences.

Kylie's narrative further demonstrates how cultural and societal pressures can influence maternal health outcomes. As an active-duty service member, Kylie faced the added challenge of navigating pregnancy and delivery without her husband, who was deployed at the time. The intersection of military culture and her maternal health journey reveals the unique stressors faced by service members, including the expectation of resilience and self-sufficiency. As Kylie shared:

My husband and I are both in the Air Force. He was deployed while I was pregnant. He got back about a week before our son was born... At my 40-week checkup, I had, my blood pressure was elevated. I had protein in my urine... I was in the ICU for I think seven more days, and I held my son for about 30 minutes the first day. So, I didn't see him again for a week.

These narratives reflect how cultural and societal influences can shape maternal health outcomes, demonstrating the need for more culturally sensitive and supportive healthcare practices that recognize and address the diverse backgrounds and experiences of pregnant women.

## Discussion

CNSM's retrospective heuristic discusses the meanings and meaningfulness of recalled memorable stories (Kellas, 2017). Meanings are made within the patterned process of storytelling a recalled significant event. Our analysis revealed that most of the participants' stories were structured redemptively, where the mothers begin by discussing some form of trouble that they encountered and resolving the tension within the story by explaining how they navigated the aforementioned difficulty. Within each story, we noted how the mothers made sense of the consequences, values, and meanings of their stories to others as suggested by researchers who engage CNSM (Barney & Yoshimura, 2021; Kellas, 2010, 2017). Through the structuring of the redemptive stories, we note how the testimonials signified the attainment of positive individual well-being, which is the second proposition of CNSM (Kellas, 2017). The reordering of their stories into redemptive narratives also serves as scripts that could potentially guide audience members' health behaviors when they encounter maternal health symptoms. These narratives highlight the negative consequences and aim to raise awareness among individuals. These stories demonstrate that they are relatable by the participants recalling how they made sense of a difficult lived experience (Charvat et al., 2021; Flood-Grady & Koenig Kellas, 2019; Horstman et al., 2023).

Similarly, Wieskamp (2018) explored the intersection of sexual violence and cultural norms through storytelling, which portrayed survivors of sexual abuse as knowledgeable and powerful. The study's narrative approach highlighted the healing

power of storytelling and demonstrated ways to overcome challenges. Further, Bates (2023) emphasized that lived experiences embody the knowledge used to seek and provide peer support, a concept applicable to maternal health as mothers share stories of childbirth, parenting, and health challenges. Scott (1984) asserted that nothing can resist the power of storytelling as a tool of insight, underscoring its potential in maternal health to foster understanding, resilience, and community among mothers.

Health campaigns are designed to raise awareness about health issues to influence positive health behaviors (Snyder, 2007). As discussed in our findings above, we identified how major and specific health conditions were described and mentioned to increase patients' awareness of symptoms related to negative maternal outcomes. Extant literature on health communication campaigns records the effect of awareness raising on influencing behavioral change. For example, Chao & So (2011) found that increasing awareness about the impact of hepatis B as a causal factor in liver cancer helped promote awareness and deeper understanding among community stakeholders, specifically Asian and Pacific Islanders who were mostly impacted by the illness. Furthermore, Chao & So (2011) explain the relevance of culturally competent health awareness campaigns in addressing community health issues. One key issue we address in this study is the lack of audience response to these campaigns except for the increased viewership. These intentional restrictions for public comments suggest the narrator's management and securing the privacy of their narratives in a way that keeps it intact and devoid of interference or co-authorship with the audience (Beck et al, 2013).

The HEAR HER campaign addresses health disparities in maternal care delivery by raising various concerns related to health advocacy and how they can be achieved. The mothers and health professionals emphasized the importance of listening and trust respectively as core aspects of advocating for quality health care during difficult pregnancy situations. To further support the importance of listening in improving patient advocacy, Martin et al. (2011) found that listening was a crucial aspect of a patient's self-literacy and essential for patient advocacy skills. Furthermore, McKenna et al. (2020) explained that while listening is complex, it fosters connectedness which is the central point of patient-centered care and autonomy. This campaign addresses and emphasizes the important role of listening by presenting mothers who have experienced pregnancy difficulties as credible sources. While the narratives emphasize the importance of advocating for oneself and being heard by healthcare providers, we also note a gap in discussing concrete solutions to address maternal health disparities. Policy changes, community-based interventions, healthcare provider training programs, and investment in maternal healthcare infrastructure are essential components of addressing systemic issues and improving outcomes.

## Limitations and Future Directions

One major limitation of this study is that it only focuses on the analysis of the campaign materials and narratives but not the effect it has on the audience. Furthermore, while the campaign addresses issues in health disparity, there is still some contextual misunderstanding related to the broader social, cultural, and historical context, that impacts the interpretations of themes messaging that aims to reduce disparities. How can future research address these gaps to further enhance the development, implementation,

and evaluation of such campaigns? Future studies benefit from conducting in-depth interviews to better assess the implications of such campaign messages on the larger audience.

**Conclusion**

We emphasize the importance of narrative-driven programs such as HEAR HER in tackling the United States rising maternal death rates. The campaign efficiently disseminates life-saving information about identifying early warning symptoms throughout pregnancy and after birth by utilizing multimedia channels and appealing storytelling. Our study illuminates the various ways in which campaign narratives contribute to boosting maternal health awareness and good health behaviors using an analysis guided by the CNSM theory. The development of major themes, such as maternal health difficulties, advocating for sensitive mother support, unconscious bias in healthcare, and the need of trust building for successful communication in maternal care, provides useful insights for future health promotion initiatives. Our findings hold significant theoretical implications, highlighting the role of narrative strategies in shaping maternal health perceptions and behaviors, as well as emphasizing the importance of incorporating narrative-based approaches into public health initiatives aimed at lowering maternal mortality rates. The conveyed CNSM theory enables us understand health consequences of unattended maternal warning signs. As health communication researchers continue to expand their use of narrative evidence, it serves as a reminder of narratives' ability to address health challenges through a culturally appropriate approach to narrative message development and dissemination.

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# "Take the Border" to Them: The Grotesque, The Burlesque, and the Symbolic Politics of Sanctuary and Spectacle

## Sophia Koleno

*In this paper I show how two high-profile political performances—Governor Greg Abbott's busing of illegal immigrants and migrants to Washington, D.C., and Governor Ron DeSantis's relocation of illegal immigrants and migrants to Martha's Vineyard—operate as synecdoches within the broader symbolic landscape of U.S. immigration discourse. Drawing on Kenneth Burke's theory of tropes and literary frames, I argue that Abbott's actions activate the grotesque frame, marked by disorder and moral contradiction, while DeSantis's follow-up move functions within the burlesque, turning crisis into spectacle. This piece is both an analysis and an invitation: to consider how lesser-used frames might sharpen our readings of public discourse, especially in moments where irony and cruelty collapse into one another.*

In the ever-evolving landscape of U.S. immigration policies and practices the actions of state leaders have played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse and narratives surrounding immigration and its respective policies. In this paper I explore how, against the backdrop of the border national immigration debate, two events—one in the Lone Star State of Texas and the other on the picturesque shores of Martha's Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts —converged to underscore the complexities of, and surrounding, contemporary immigration discourse particularly at the southern border. In May 2022, the Biden administration announced the cessation of Title 42 enforcement, a policy that allowed the expulsion of illegal immigrants and migrants arriving at the U.S. border without providing an opportunity to seek asylum. Initially implemented during President Trump's administration to combat COVID-19 transmission, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) declared the COVID era policy obsolete on April 1st after evaluating public health conditions. This directive had been consistently enforced throughout the pandemic, deterring illegal immigrants and migrants from entering the U.S., expelling them under its provisions, and indicating a commitment to enforcing immigration laws beyond the policy's end (Sherman & Swann, 2022). In response to President Biden's actions, in April 2022, Texas Governor Greg Abbott launched a series of controversial initiatives to tackle illegal immigration and migration along the Texas-Mexico border. Governor Abbott's approach involved deploying state troopers with riot gear to meet illegal immigrants and migrants at the border and transport them to Washington, D.C., as a bold and surprising move (Office of the Texas Governor, 2022). Abbott's actions were driven by his strong opposition to perceived federal leniency in immigration policies, sparking a heated national debate on border security and immigration reform. Moreover, his actions served as a catalyst for similar strategies in states like Arizona and Florida,

involving the relocation of immigrants to politically strategic and significant locations by, primarily, private charter busses and flights financed by taxpayer funds (Hutzler, 2022).

This paper is notably based on one such instance involving Florida Governor Ron DeSantis who, in September 2022, transported 50 Venezuelan illegal immigrants and migrants via airplane from Texas to Martha's Vineyard, a recognized sanctuary city. This action intensified the focus of both local and national discussions on immigration and border security (Aguilera, 2022). Analyzing both Governor Abbott's actions in Texas and the events that transpired in Martha's Vineyard, I contend that they operate within one of Burke's (1969) four master tropes, the synecdoche, and that the events in Texas and Martha's Vineyard have a symbiotic relationship with one another. In the context of the actions that unfolded within the two localities, they can be understood as synecdoches of the broader discourse surrounding U.S. immigration. Just as a synecdoche involves using a part to symbolize the whole, these instances served as emblematic representations of the larger immigration debate in the United States. Through this relationship, I further argue that Abbott's actions align and rhetorically function within the Burkean transcendent literary frame of the grotesque, which highlights the absurdity and chaos of federal government failure in border security. While Governor DeSantis' illegal immigrants and migrants' relocation to Martha's Vineyard functions as a synecdoche within the burlesque frame made viable by the transformative grotesque that had taken place in Texas. Thus, the transition from grotesque to burlesque becomes intelligible only when understood in sequence. The grotesque staging in Texas—marked by chaos, contradiction, and heightened affect—established the rhetorical and emotional groundwork that made the burlesque frame viable in Martha's Vineyard. In this way, the events in Texas and Martha's Vineyard did not merely mirror one another; they engaged in a dynamic rhetorical interplay, with the grotesque amplifying the conditions for burlesque to emerge. To substantiate my argument and guide the subsequent analysis, I begin by outlining the key events in both localities. I then turn to Burkean theory and relevant scholarship to establish the conceptual foundations of my rhetorical analysis. Finally, I conclude by considering how recent shifts in federal immigration policy—particularly under the current administration—may reshape the symbolic landscape, inviting renewed attention to how rhetorical frames evolve alongside political change.

## Contextualizing Texas and Martha's Vineyard

In response to the Biden administration's actions post-May 2022, Governor Abbott articulated his plan to "take the border" to President Biden by delivering illegal immigrants and migrants to D.C. via charter buses and flights (Sherman & Swann, 2022). This initial move received mixed reactions from the political body of Texas with some interpreting it as a political maneuver, and others seeing it as a necessary response to the escalating crisis. For instance, Governor Abbott's choices garnered praise from figures like Texas Republican Senator Ted Cruz, while drawing criticism from individuals like Texas Republican Congresswoman Sylvia Garcia (RepSylviaGarcia, 2023). From April to September of 2022, Abbott's office reported that over "7,700 migrants have been dropped off in Washington on more than 185 buses…and more than 2,100 people have been sent to New York City" (Aguilera, 2022). City leaders, particularly Democratic mayors like D.C.'s Muriel Bowser and Eric Adams, described the arrival of these

individuals as placing considerable strain on already overburdened municipal systems. The sudden influx overwhelmed city infrastructures unprepared to provide adequate housing, healthcare, food, and transportation. Mayor Bowser submitted two formal requests for National Guard support, charging Abbott with leveraging human suffering for political spectacle, while Mayor Adams denounced the busing as "horrific" and claimed Texas officials had coerced migrants onto the vehicles (Aguilera, 2022).

These responses from municipal leaders bring into focus the broader political tensions that arise when federal immigration policy, state resistance, and local capacities intersect. This intergovernmental tension can be traced to Governor Abbott's staunch opposition to what he characterizes as overly permissive federal immigration policies. His high-profile actions not only deepened the national debate surrounding border security and immigration reform but also set a precedent for similar measures in other states. For instance, Arizona soon adopted comparable tactics, transporting migrants to sanctuary cities as a means of challenging federal authority and spotlighting perceived failures in immigration enforcement. These state-level responses are emblematic of a growing trend: the use of illegal immigrants and migrant relocation not merely as logistical redirection, but as symbolic political messaging aimed at federal leadership and sanctuary jurisdictions alike. Sanctuary cities in the United States are municipalities that adopt policies limiting cooperation with federal immigration enforcement. These policies aim to build trust between local law enforcement and immigrant communities, enabling undocumented immigrants and migrants to access essential services and report crimes without fear of deportation (Hausman, 2020). The primary ideological focus of these cities is to prioritize community safety by allocating local law enforcement resources toward protecting residents, rather than enforcing federal immigration laws. As a result, they typically do not share immigration status information with federal authorities or detain individuals based on immigration detainers, unless legally obligated to do so.

Sanctuary cities are distributed across the United States and are not confined to border states (Vaughan & Griffith, 2023). Their presence responds more to national immigration policy dynamics than to geographic proximity to international borders. Notable sanctuary cities include San Francisco, New York City, and Chicago, while sanctuary counties include localities such as San Diego County, CA; Hennepin County, MN; and Franklin County, OH. Across these municipalities, city-specific policies and support systems are in place to meet the needs of undocumented immigrants and migrants. Examining the broader implications of sanctuary city policies in relation to state-level immigration strategies, the actions of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis offer a particularly illustrative case. On September 14, 2022, DeSantis drew national media attention by orchestrating the relocation of 50 Venezuelan illegal immigrants and migrants to Martha's Vineyard, a well-known island community associated with liberal values and affluence, and home to residents such as former President Barack Obama (Aguilera, 2022). While not all areas of the island have formally adopted sanctuary policies, towns like Edgartown, Chilmark, and Tisbury have expressed support for sanctuary principles since 2017 (Settles, 2022). With this relocation—coordinated from San Antonio, Texas—Martha's Vineyard was abruptly placed at the center of the national immigration debate. That same day, Governor DeSantis issued a public statement affirming that the airlift was part of Florida's official relocation initiative, aimed at transporting illegal immigrants to self-identified sanctuary jurisdictions (Kushwaha,

2022a). This maneuver, much like Governor Abbott's earlier efforts, signals the use of sanctuary cities not merely as geographic destinations, but as symbolic targets within a broader political performance.

The relocation to Martha's Vineyard sparked a cascade of responses, each layered with political, historical, and ethical implications. To some observers, the act was a calculated political provocation that elicited moral outrage and even drew unsettling parallels to historical practices such as the internment of marginalized groups (Rondeau, 2022). Massachusetts Senator Julian Cyr condemned the tactic, comparing it to the reverse freedom rides of the 1960s and describing it as a cruel manipulation of families seeking a better life. He criticized those responsible for turning human suffering into a political spectacle aimed at securing a "gotcha" moment (Kushwaha, 2022a). Congressman Bill Keating, representing Massachusetts's 9th congressional district, similarly denounced the relocation as a cynical misuse of public resources and a blatant exploitation of vulnerable people (Kushwaha, 2022b). Beth Folcarelli, CEO of Martha's Vineyard Community Services, stressed the logistical and ethical concerns by pointing to the absence of refugee infrastructure on the island and the disorientation experienced by migrants who arrived with no prior ties to the community (Kushwaha, 2022b). Adding to these voices, Massachusetts State Representative Dylan Fernandes framed the incident as a manufactured crisis, one that demanded a humanitarian response to a politically orchestrated event (Pollard, 2022).

Amid the contentious debate on immigration, there were those who lauded Governor DeSantis's approach, seeing it as a necessary measure to cast light on the immigration difficulties that border states are enduring, and to emphasize the broader consequences of what are considered by some as open-border policies (Rondeau, 2022). This support came into sharp focus when, only six days following the unexpected arrival of migrants in Martha's Vineyard, Governor Abbott, yet again, made a similarly bold move. He sent two buses of illegal immigrants and migrants to the doorstep of Vice President Harris. Abbott's act was a clear message, as he publicly declared, "We're sending migrants to her backyard to call on the Biden Administration to do its job [and] secure the border" (Hutzler, 2022). The combined efforts of DeSantis, Abbott, and their fellow Republican counterparts constitute a unified display of dissent, voicing their opposition to the Biden administration's immigration policies in response to the escalating influx of migrants at the southern U.S. border. This dynamic becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of Burkean concepts.

**Framing Symbolic Belonging**

To analyze the rhetorical dynamics shaping migrant relocation and sanctuary city discourse, I draw on Kenneth Burke's theory of the four master tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—with a particular focus on synecdoche. These tropes operate as symbolic and cognitive tools, enabling rhetorical actors to reduce, reframe, and re-present complex realities. Synecdoche, specifically, provides a theoretical anchor for this analysis by allowing discrete political acts—such as the relocation of illegal immigrants and migrants, civilian commentary, or public statements by city leaders—to stand in for broader ideological currents. As Burke (1969) explains, these tropes often

overlap in symbolic function, revealing how public perception is shaped by correspondence between what is seen and what is represented:

> As a mental state it is the "representation" of certain material conditions, so we could—reversing the process—saying that the material conditions are "representative" of the mental state. That is, if there is some kind of correspondence between what we call the act of perception and what we call the thing perceived, then either of these equivalents can be taken as "representative" of the other thus, as reduction (monotony) overlaps with metaphor (perspectives) so likewise it overlaps upon synecdoche (representation). (p. 507)

His emphasis on representation proves especially useful for examining immigration discourse, where political acts and public performances often function symbolically. As Burke elaborates, "synecdochic form is present in all theories of political representation, where some part of the societal body (either traditionally established, or elected, or coming into authority by revolution) is held to be 'representative' of the society as a whole" (p. 508). In this sense, immigrant and migrant relocation strategies and the surrounding discourse function as synecdoches: they distill broader national tensions into highly visible, emotionally charged events. Synecdochic analysis, then, becomes a gateway for understanding how rhetorical exemplars circulate within a larger symbolic ecology—how they travel, accrue meaning, and shape ideological narratives. Synecdoche also operates through and alongside Burke's literary frames—particularly the grotesque and the burlesque—which serve to amplify the symbolic reach of public acts. In this context, Abbott and DeSantis do not merely enact isolated state-level responses; their actions become emblematic of broader ideological struggles. The grotesque frame amplifies contradiction, blending tension and survival amid institutional breakdown. The burlesque, by contrast, thrives on ridicule and exaggeration, using surface performance to distort and simplify. Both rhetorical forms collapse complexity into spectacle, making specific events legible as stand-ins for national crisis, cultural hypocrisy, and/or governmental dysfunction. In doing so, grotesque and burlesque performances intensify the synecdochic function: they condense systemic debates into theatricalized moments, allowing political actors to symbolically embody the grievances, failures, and moral contradictions of federal immigration policy.

Before turning to Burke's (1984) concept of literary frames, it is also useful to consider adjacent frameworks that deepen the synecdochic reading of immigration discourse—particularly those addressing symbolic boundaries and national identity. Heuman and González's (2018) study of President Trump's essentialist border rhetoric demonstrates how migrants are constructed as racialized threats whose presence destabilizes the imagined coherence of national identity. These constructions create what they call "dangerous liminalities," which justify exclusionary performances and state violence. Though centered on Trump's first presidency, their insights remain relevant in the current moment, as similar rhetorical strategies continue to animate state-level responses to immigration. Likewise, Anderson's (1983) theory of imagined communities offers a foundation for understanding how rhetorical appeals to American or Texan identity frame who belongs—and who is cast out—within political performances. Flores (2003) has further shaped rhetorical studies of immigration by tracing how the figure of

the "illegal alien" operates as a stand-in for broader societal anxieties about race, labor, and national coherence. Her work demonstrates how immigration discourse performs ideological work—shoring up national identity by projecting disorder and threat onto migrant bodies. Within this rhetorical economy, migrants are not just outsiders; they are symbolic foils through which dominant narratives of legality, security, and Americanness are reinforced.

**Literary Frames, the Grotesque and the Burlesque**

Building on these broader symbolic frameworks, Burke's (1984) concept of literary frames offers a more granular understanding of how individuals interpret, respond to, and perform within sociopolitical environments marked by instability or contradiction. Literary frames function as cognitive instruments through which individuals interpret, make sense of, and respond to the complexity of their social and political environments. Burke identifies two primary types of frames: frames of acceptance and frames of rejection, with transitional frames mediating between these poles. Frames of acceptance refer to "the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relations to it" (Burke, 1984, p. 5). These frames provide symbolic coherence and guide individuals in adopting roles aligned with social purposes. They tend to affirm existing social or cognitive structures and include archetypal modes such as the tragic, epic, and comic. In this sense, frames of acceptance are generally constructive—they sustain prevailing norms by offering rational, intelligible pathways for action and understanding. However, Burke cautions that an overreliance on purely affirmative frames can become limiting, as their partiality may obscure deeper complexities or perpetuate zealotry under the guise of stability.

Frames of rejection, on the other hand, emerge when prevailing frames of acceptance are no longer sufficient to make sense of social upheaval or to facilitate necessary change. Rejection becomes salient during moments when individuals resist dominant narratives, challenge conventional roles, or confront ruptures in the sociopolitical order. As Burke explains:

> "Rejection;" is but a by-product of; "acceptance." It involves primarily a matter of; emphasis. It takes its color from an attitude towards some reigning symbol of; authority, stressing a shift in the allegiance to symbols of; authority. It is the heretical aspect of; an orthodoxy-and as such, it has much in common with the "frame of; acceptance" that it rejects. (p. 21)

In this manner, frames of rejection are not entirely divorced from the logics of acceptance; rather, they reorient them, often through critique, resistance, or dissociation from dominant ideologies. Contrasting with the stabilizing influence of acceptance, rejection foregrounds rupture, dissonance, and the desire for ideological recalibration.

Beyond these poles, Burke introduces transitional frames, which mediate the tension between affirmation and rejection. Of particular relevance here is the grotesque frame, which Burke (1984) describes as "preponderantly transitional… The grotesque focuses in mysticism; the didactic to-day is usually called propaganda" (p. 57). The grotesque operates in moments of ambiguity and transformation, where existing symbolic

orders begin to unravel and unfamiliar, often unsettling, representations take hold. This frame allows for rhetorical innovation and critical reimagination, positioning the grotesque as a powerful interpretive tool for understanding how meaning is stretched, distorted, or reinvented in moments of political theater and public spectacle. More precisely Burke characterizes the grotesque as "the cult of incongruity without the laughter" (p. 58), distinguishing it from humor, which "specializes in incongruities" through "conversion downwards"—a rhetorical move that provides relief by reassuring us and minimizing perceived threats. But the grotesque refuses such consolation. As Burke continues: "The grotesque is not funny unless you are out of sympathy with it (whereby it serves as unintentional burlesque). Insofar as you are in sympathy with it, it is deadly earnest" (p. 58). This formulation reveals that the grotesque is not simply a mode of critique or satire, but a mode of endurance. It requires that the audience recognize dissonance not as an aberration to be resolved, but as a truth to be survived. This is what makes grotesque rhetoric so compelling in moments of political fracture because it invites us into the unresolved. Burke continues that "the incongruity of the grotesque-mystical comes to a focus in the oxymoron: one hears silence, people's loneliness, feels distance, and sees in the dark" (p. 59). These are not contradictions to be smoothed over—they are conditions of being that must be endured when systems fail to make sense.

Though often overlooked or misunderstood, the grotesque, as a transitional frame, occupies a vital rhetorical space—what Buerkle (2010) describes as a perspective that seeks to reject the current order but remains unwilling or unable to fully detach from it, thus rendering true transformation elusive. As Buerkle explains, "for though the grotesque brings together conflicting elements, its goal remains survival rather than a great enlightenment or new religion." In this view, the grotesque does not aim for ideological transcendence or revolution; instead, it reflects an urgent grappling with contradiction. It fuses incompatible elements—beauty and horror, truth and distortion, authority and collapse—into a single frame that highlights the absurdity and tension of a given moment. Its power lies in exposing fissures, not healing them. The grotesque therefore reveals the instability of dominant narratives by emphasizing incongruity without prescribing resolution. Within the context of immigration discourse, this frame proves especially useful for analyzing policies and public performances that simultaneously claim moral authority while enacting forms of cruelty or incoherence. Closely related, yet distinct in tone and function, is Burke's burlesque frame—another critical lens for rhetorical analysis that surfaces when moral critique adopts the guise of exaggerated mockery or ridicule.

While the grotesque unveils contradiction through incongruity and paradox, Burke's (1984) burlesque frame takes a different rhetorical path—one that emphasizes exaggerated external characteristics over nuanced internal complexity. As Burke explains, burlesque operates through rhetorical strategies such as "as polemic and caricature" (1984, p. 54), elevating surface features while stripping the subject of interpretive depth. In the realm of burlesque, the key lies in the deliberate selection and exaggeration of a subject's external behaviors, driving them to what Burke describes as a "reduction to absurdity" (p. 54). Rather than seeking understanding or invoking empathy, the burlesque frame distills its target to a set of exaggerated traits, leading to what Burke calls a "reduction to absurdity" (p. 54). In this framing, ambiguity is eliminated, and

every perhaps is transformed into a blunt certainty, leaving little room for moral or psychological nuance.

Moore (1992) further contended that the "burlesque can be viewed as a form of "comic rejection," or as a negative method of revealing acceptance (just as beauty can be affirmed by criticizing the ugly, or courage and competence by debunking the cowardly buffoon)" (p. 112). Appel (1996) expands on the burlesque, describing the frame of rejection as that which creates a space of conditional exclusion. While it doesn't entirely dismiss its targets from the conversation, the "burlesque removes its targets from the central narrative, effectively scapegoating them without expelling them from the realm of human empathy" (p. 272). In a later work, Appel (2009) offers a vivid portrait of the burlesque rhetor as a:

> self-important, egocentric logician, a Gulliver in a land of Lilliputian opponents, to be sure, but not quite as awesomely mythic as the rhetorical tragedian. As such, the burlesque frame stays superficial, eschewing any deep exploration of the target's motivations or complexities (p. 219).

Selby (2005) echoes this interpretation, noting that burlesque "encompasses social disorder by constructing a ridiculous caricature of the antagonist" (p. 315). In doing so, it stresses not only the necessity of rejection but also, potentially, the rhetorical groundwork for transformative social critique. As we now pivot from theoretical scaffolding into detailed analysis, these overlapping yet distinct frameworks—the synecdochic, the grotesque, and the burlesque—offer a textured analytic perspective through which to interrogate the symbolic politics of immigrant and migrant relocation and the rhetorical performances surrounding sanctuary cities.

**The Grotesque Frame: State Authority Spectacle**

The migrant relocation efforts led by Governors Abbott and DeSantis—first in Texas and then in Martha's Vineyard—reshaped the rhetorical terrain of immigration discourse in the United States. Through Burke's theoretical framework theory, these moments illustrate how the grotesque and burlesque frames are not simply styles of communication, but dynamic strategies that make political tensions visible, visceral, and emotionally resonant. Importantly, these acts operate synecdochically, transforming isolated instances into condensed symbols of national conflict. As Burke (1969) describes, synecdoche allows a part to stand in for the whole—here, two local events become emblematic of broader struggles over immigration, federalism, and the politics of belonging. Rather than remaining isolated performances, they are transformed into sites where rhetorical framing shifts, converges, and performs—revealing how political communication operates not only through policy but through spectacle, gesture, and symbolic amplification.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Texas, where Governor Abbott's longstanding opposition to sanctuary-aligned reforms crystallized in his reaction to Austin's 2017 "freedom city" declaration. By limiting arrests for minor offenses and requiring officers to inform individuals of their immigration rights, the policy reframed the relationship between law enforcement and immigrant communities. Abbott responded

by invoking a language of public safety, positioning himself as a protector of Texas citizens and casting Austin's policies as reckless and ideologically misguided (Henderson, 2018). This rhetorical stance aligned seamlessly with his broader legislative agenda—most notably the 2017 passage of Senate Bill 4, which banned sanctuary policies and empowered local law enforcement to question immigration status during detentions (Blitzer, 2023). In 2023, Abbott reaffirmed this posture by directing the Texas Department of Public Safety to support Austin police, proclaiming that "Texas has always been—and always will be—a law and order state" (Office of the Texas Governor, 2023). These rhetorical and legislative maneuvers construct Abbott's image as a disciplined defender of state sovereignty and public safety, while implicitly framing sanctuary policies as disorderly, dangerous, and ideologically suspect. His public staging of migrant transport—complete with media coverage, press conferences, and visual spectacle—performs what Burke (1984) describes as the grotesque frame: a "cult of incongruity without the laughter" (p. 58). To that degree that audiences are in sympathy with the act, it is, as Burke notes, "deadly earnest" (p. 58). Abbott's use of state resources to relocate vulnerable populations under the guise of policy communication highlights the grotesque incongruity between proclaimed moral purpose and visualized human suffering. These acts of governance function as theatricalized declarations of discipline, transforming sanctuary spaces into symbols of moral transgression and positioning the state as the rightful guardian of order and protection.

The affective power of Abbott's rhetorical and legislative maneuvers is central to their impact. By leveraging fear, outrage, and symbolic excess, he mobilizes audiences along ideological lines and constructs himself as a disciplined defender of state sovereignty and public safety. His grotesque performance—steeped in affect and spectacle—lays the emotional groundwork that renders subsequent actions, like DeSantis's burlesque intervention in Martha's Vineyard, both legible and persuasive. This groundwork depends on a public already primed to interpret immigration as an existential crisis and to view sanctuary jurisdictions as sites of disorder and ideological failure. Anti-sanctuary measures such as Senate Bill 4 operate simultaneously as tools of legal enforcement and symbolic assertions of state authority—reframing immigration as a threat to public order and reclaiming power from a federal government portrayed as ineffectual (Gulasekaram et al., 2019). Through this dual function, Abbott's rhetoric casts sanctuary policies not as administrative alternatives but as ideological ruptures in the moral and social fabric of the state. His alliance with local law enforcement agencies willing to cooperate with ICE and DHS further reinforces this construction, positioning Texas as embattled, disciplined, and sovereign. These rhetorical strategies transform policy into performance and spectacle into authority. Operating synecdochically, Abbott's discourse reduces complex municipal initiatives into caricatured examples of federal permissiveness, amplifying the symbolic contrast between state discipline and national dysfunction. In doing so, he recasts state intervention not only as constitutionally justified but as morally necessary—a stance that would come to define the rhetorical trajectory of later immigration spectacles.

**The Burlesque Frame: Comic, Irony, and Moral Performance**

Inspired by the precedent set in Texas, the events that unfolded on Martha's Vineyard similarly function as a synecdochic representation of the broader immigration debate in the United States—extending that discourse beyond the borders of traditionally affected states and into affluent, liberal-leaning enclaves. The sudden arrival of migrants on this Massachusetts island elicited a range of public reactions, each reflecting distinct ideological positions within the national conversation on immigration. These responses should not be viewed as isolated rhetorical moments, but as expressions shaped by—and contributing to—a larger symbolic dialogue already in motion across the country. The rhetorical power and influence of this moment lies not only in its spectacle, but in the local voices that gave it texture—each response operating as a fragment of the broader national imaginary.

For instance, several residents of Martha's Vineyard responded with public statements that, while grounded in the immediacy of local concern, echoed broader national discourses about immigration, governance, and moral responsibility. Gail (2022), a resident of Edgartown, offered a comment that blends emotional empathy with pointed political critique: "What a mess our country is in… I feel bad for the people they are not the problem. It's our poor leadership in Washington DC … Praying for change in November! And term limits for all!!" While her response expresses compassion for the migrants, it more forcefully communicates a growing public sentiment: that the federal government has failed to adequately manage the nation's immigration system. Gail, thus functions synecdochically as an everyday voice articulating a broader discourse of disillusionment with national leadership, one that uses empathy to underscore institutional critique. In the world of Burke, Gail's gesture resembles what he calls a comic corrective: a critique of systemic failure grounded in a transcendent perspective that holds space for reform and human dignity. As Burke (1984) writes, the comic frame allows for acknowledgment of error without ultimate damnation, often redirecting attention from condemnation to understanding.

Similarly, Sig Van Raan (2022) of West Tisbury offered a humanitarian response grounded in moral performance. His comment—"A special thank you to Governors DeSantis and Abbott for offering us the opportunity to demonstrate human compassion and human dignity at its best"—recasts what many viewed as a political provocation into a chance for ethical demonstration. Rather than viewing the relocation as a failure of leadership, Van Raan reinterprets it as an opportunity to model public hospitality and reaffirm shared human values. His rhetoric, like Gail's, foregrounds the dignity of migrants but redirects attention toward communal virtue instead of political critique. This response exemplifies Burke's comic frame, which replaces scapegoating with imaginative reordering and the potential for transcendence (Burke, 1984). What was intended as a spectacle of disruption becomes, in Van Raan's view, a stage for compassion—a moment to embody the very sanctuary ideals meant to be undermined. Both he and Gail thus participate in the comic frame, converting crisis into rhetorical openings for grace. Yet their emphases diverge: Gail gestures toward institutional failure, while Van Raan highlights moral clarity. Together, they serve as synecdoches for broader public reactions—ones that humanize migrants without collapsing into ideological binaries. Their comments further demonstrate how empathy functions not only as a

rhetorical critique of national policy but also as a localized expression of ethical aspiration.

In contrast, other voices articulated a very different rhetorical posture—one grounded in legality, order, and the prioritization of citizens' needs. Jeff Baker (2022), a resident of Prospect, Maine, responded from a distance with a tone that was more emotionally charged than some of the local voices: "What part of ILLEGAL don't you understand! Feel sorry for the hard working ISLAND POOR that are sleeping in the state Forest first!" His comment centers legality and economic fairness, drawing a stark boundary between citizens and migrants, and emphasizing a zero-sum logic in which support for one group inherently disadvantages the other. Though physically removed from Martha's Vineyard, Baker's engagement signals how symbolic immigration events reverberate beyond their immediate contexts—activating deeply held beliefs about who deserves state attention and compassion. Beth (2022), a resident of Edgartown, echoed similar concerns in a more measured tone: "If we the citizens are to obey the laws of our country, shouldn't the same be applied to those who come to our country illegally, as well as the politicians who don't enforce the immigration laws? … This is what happens when the immigration laws are not enforced, and the border is left open. It is very disruptive to the local government, and takes tax dollars and time away from the problems we already have in this country." Her comment centers rule of law and civic reciprocity, suggesting that the erosion of immigration enforcement not only disrupts social cohesion, but diverts local resources from already existing domestic needs.

Unlike the comic frame employed by Gail and Van Raan, both Baker and Beth participate in what Burke (1984) calls the tragic frame, wherein societal problems are understood through the lens of sacrifice and scapegoating. In this view, migrants are not cast as fellow actors in a shared human drama but as violators of order whose presence threatens the sanctity of the body politic. Burke (1984) describes this tragic orientation as one that seeks purification through victimage—a dynamic in which disorder is symbolically purged by casting out a scapegoat. Both Beth and Baker participate in this logic, their rhetoric grounded in an idealized vision of legality and national order that identifies migrants as violators to be contained or disciplined.

These perspectives are far from isolated. Chishti and Putzel-Kavanaugh (2024) observe that during the 2024 election cycle, Republican candidates and affiliated groups flooded battleground media markets with ads linking perceived chaos at the border to failures in Democratic governance. These messages portrayed immigration not as a distant issue but as a national crisis amplified by an ineffective federal response. Similarly, Flores (2024) notes that GOP campaigns spent over $117 million on anti-immigration advertising, not only portraying the border as lawless but emphasizing the connection between immigration and broader federal dysfunction. Weissert and Colvin (2024) report that these critiques of immigration policy began to resonate beyond traditional partisan boundaries. The association between immigrant and migrant arrivals and institutional mismanagement found traction even among those outside Trump's base, further confirming that frustration with federal leadership had become a symbolic and unifying theme for a wider swath of the electorate.

These campaign strategies, and the public reactions they cultivate, echo the rhetorical patterns identified by Heuman and González (2018), who argue that (illegal) immigrants and migrants in Trump-era discourse are often constructed as occupying

"dangerous liminalities"—neither fully outside nor inside the nation-state, and therefore perceived as threats to the social, racial, and political order. These representations rely on essentialist understandings of identity that frame migrants as disruptive presences, justifying exclusion, surveillance, and intensified enforcement. In this context, Baker (2022) and Beth (2022) operate rhetorically as synecdoches—not simply as individuals voicing isolated concerns, but as representative figures articulating a broader public discourse shaped by racialized fear, institutional disillusionment, and a perceived erosion of civic order. Their focus on legality, strain, and federal ineffectiveness reflects not only partisan anxieties but also deeper symbolic constructions of migrants as destabilizing agents. Rather than responding only to a local event, their comments reflect a national mood—one in which the migrant becomes a proxy for larger anxieties surrounding sovereignty, identity, and belonging. As Flores (2003) argues, the figure of the "illegal alien" functions rhetorically to consolidate fears about cultural erosion and economic instability, operating as a floating signifier through which broader tensions about race, labor, and national coherence are negotiated. In this sense, Beth and Baker's responses do more than articulate policy concerns; they participate in a symbolic economy that constructs migrants not as people, but as contested signs through which the boundaries of Americanness are reasserted and policed.

**Rhetorical Convergence and Public Sentiment**

Having examined the varied public reactions to the Martha's Vineyard relocation, it is helpful to return to Texas, where Governor Abbott's actions laid the symbolic groundwork for these later events. Abbott's deployment of state troopers to the border and his decision to transport migrants to Washington, D.C. exemplify what Burke (1984) describes as the grotesque frame—a rhetorical perspective that accentuates incongruity and contradiction, not through satire or humor, but through stark, unsettling contrast. In this context, Abbott's approach does not resolve tensions; it exposes them. His strategy— embodied in the promise to "take the border" to President Biden—underscores the disjointed relationship between state-level assertiveness and perceived federal inaction (Sherman & Swann, 2022). Viewed through the grotesque frame, these actions function as political theater whilst laying bare the contradictions embedded in the national immigration system. The image of illegal immigrants and migrants being bused across state lines as a form of protest presents a visual and rhetorical spectacle—one that highlights the disconnect between state sovereignty and federal responsibility. Rather than offering solutions, Abbott's tactics draw attention to systemic dissonance: states intervening in ways that both mimic and challenge federal authority. In doing so, the grotesque frame amplifies the absurdity of a fractured system—where legality, compassion, and political gain collide without coherence. These performances not only escalated the national conversation on border security but also, crucially, accentuated the symbolic instability of immigration policy in the American political imagination. Buerkle's (2010) reading of the grotesque as a transitional rhetorical frame helps showcase the broader strategy embedded within Abbott's rhetoric. The grotesque, as Buerkle notes, is not driven by the pursuit of moral clarity or utopian resolution; instead, it reflects a desire to survive and/or persist amid contradiction—a rhetorical stance and strategy that tolerates incoherence because it has no other choice but to navigate it.

Abbott's options, when viewed through this lens, resists systemic reform or ideological reinvention. Instead, it stages and positions survival as performance. This becomes particularly evident in Abbott's use of social media.

In a 2023 post on X, Abbott declared: "Biden's open border policies left Texas border towns overrun and overwhelmed. Texas has bused over 24,000 migrants to sanctuary cities to provide relief." His language here is urgent, almost apocalyptic with words such as "overrun," and "overwhelmed." These terms conjure images of invasion, collapse, and unmanageable strain, but they are paired with a gesture of bureaucratic action—the bus count, the targeted destination, the word "relief." This juxtaposition between chaos and containment, panic and procedure, is precisely what gives the grotesque frame its rhetorical shape and texture. It thrives on paradox by staging absurdity without resolution. Abbott does not propose structural transformation; rather, he dramatizes dysfunction and then performs control not to restore order, but to sustain it under pressure. Viewed in this way, Abbott's grotesque performance is far more than a provocation or critique of federal immigration policy—it is a rhetorical act of survival, a declaration made under conditions of perceived abandonment. Moreover, it stages a confrontation with *both* federal inaction and the incoherence of a system in which states are left to manage crises with limited authority and insufficient support. His symbolic choices—dramatic, unsettling, and logistically extreme—represent in grotesque terms, a last-resort maneuver and a refusal to let Texas be overwhelmed without response. The grotesque frame bares that Abbott's actions function as a kind of embodied protest: "You've left me nothing but chaos—this is what it looks like when I give it back." In doing so, he extends the grotesque into the domain of executive performance by using symbolic disruption to assert control and demand recognition. This recasts grotesque rhetoric as a tool for weathering it—an unsettling yet purposeful means of asserting control when governance falters.

Following Abbott's grotesque political theater, Governor DeSantis' decision to fly illegal immigrants and migrants to Martha's Vineyard represents a rhetorical shift—from the dissonant urgency of survival to the theatrical staging of contradiction. Where the grotesque exposes systemic absurdities through unsettled tension, the burlesque frame, as articulated by Burke (1984), exaggerates those absurdities through deliberate satire and spectacle. DeSantis' actions do not simply critique federal immigration policy—they perform that critique by targeting the symbolic terrain of sanctuary politics. His choice of Martha's Vineyard—a wealthy, liberal-identified sanctuary island—as the destination was not incidental. It was a carefully constructed rhetorical move, designed to reduce the complexity of immigration discourse into a scene of caricature, contrast, and contradiction. This action functions as a synecdoche for broader conservative frustrations with the perceived hypocrisy of sanctuary jurisdictions. Sanctuary cities, by their very ethos, offer protection and support for illegal immigrants and undocumented migrants, yet the sudden arrival of just fifty migrants prompted logistical panic. Shelter staff admitted that the facility used was "a stopgap—it is not a long-term solution," and that "we can't house anyone here" (Kushwaha, 2022b). These statements, when contrasted with the sustained pressures faced by Texas border towns, become sites of farcical dissonance. In burlesque terms, DeSantis reframes sanctuary as a performance that collapses under the weight of actual responsibility.

The absurdity is amplified not just in the relocation itself, but in the rhetorical aftermath. DeSantis explained two days later: "It's somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but it is true, if you sent (them) to Delaware or Martha's Vineyard or some of these places, the border would be secure the next day" (Hanna et al., 2022). This remark is emblematic of the burlesque frame—it is flippant, exaggerated, and cutting because the aim of the burlesquer is exposure. By forcing sanctuary spaces to enact their professed commitments, DeSantis produces what Appel (2009) describes as the burlesque's "reduction to absurdity"—a performance that strips away nuance in favor of blunt rhetorical impact. The humor here is not benign; it is strategic. It ridicules the perceived moral posture of sanctuary politics by confronting it with unannounced, embodied consequences. In doing so, DeSantis reframes immigration not as a matter of humanitarian need, but as a stage for rhetorical spectacle that leverages the moment to expose what he portrays as liberal inconsistency. The burlesque thrives on such dissonance, turning lofty political declarations into setups and their failure to materialize into the punchline.

DeSantis' actions, while styled as satirical, also surfaces a deeper contradiction within the sanctuary city discourse. Sanctuary spaces often declare their values symbolically—through statements of welcome and moral clarity—but rarely face the structural demands that border communities routinely navigate. In sending illegal immigrants and migrants to Martha's Vineyard DeSantis both mocked sanctuary declarations and forced them into performative confrontation with their own rhetoric. The resulting scramble for resources and public statements about logistical strain accentuated the gap between political identity and material capacity. From a burlesque perspective, this is precisely the target: the exaggeration of sanctuary virtue until it collapses into visible contradiction. The burlesque frame, then, exposes the instability of symbolic posturing when it meets the real, human stakes of immigration and migration.

Beneath the satire lies a sobering echo of conditions long familiar to border communities. The scramble in Martha's Vineyard mirrored the disorientation and logistical strain often experienced in towns across Texas and Arizona—yet without the infrastructure, long-term exposure, or federal support those states have been forced to navigate. DeSantis' strategy, while theatrical, served a disruptive rhetorical purpose: collapsing the safe ideological distance between sanctuary politics and lived consequences. By re-situating the migrant experience into liberal, affluent spaces, the relocation demanded a public reckoning with the contradictions between declared commitments and practical capacities. In doing so, DeSantis' move built upon the rhetorical momentum initiated by Abbott. Where Abbott's grotesque dramatized the tension of governing through chaos, DeSantis' burlesque stylized that chaos—shaping it into farce, satire, and political spectacle. Their strategies differ in tone and technique, yet together they chart a continuum of symbolic intervention that prioritizes performance over policy, spectacle over consensus. Both moments sharpen our understanding of Burke's frames as adaptive rhetorical instruments—tools for categorizing communication and also for shaping the terms of political engagement during periods of institutional fragility and cultural polarization.

**Symbolic Repercussions and Contemporary Shifts**

When I began drafting this project in a doctoral seminar I was drawn to Burke's grotesque and burlesque frames not only for their interpretive possibility but because they seemed oddly underused—especially considering the theatricality of our current political moment. I found an array of scholarship that utilizes Burke's ideas on the tragic or comic frame, and understandably so: these frames offer clarity, closure, even hope. But in revisiting the migrant relocation campaigns of Governors Abbott and DeSantis, it became clear that these more familiar frames could not fully account for the dissonance I was seeing—the fusion of affect, spectacle, legality, and satire that made these actions both brutal and strangely performative. The grotesque and burlesque are built to register this kind of ambiguity. They help us understand how a policy decision becomes a symbolic act, how an act of governance morphs into a stage play. They foreground how audiences are primed, how moral clarity is undercut by irony, and how outrage becomes rehearsed. What I've tried to show in this analysis is that Abbott's and DeSantis's campaigns were rhetorically layered and that they are constitutive of how public discourse functions in times of deep ideological fracture. They operate in the slipstreams between satire and cruelty, irony and violence, spectacle and sincerity—making them particularly suited to the affective volatility of our present moment.

As I write, Israel's genocide in Gaza continues, with images of mutilated children and flattened cities filling our screens—grotesque not just in form, but in moral absurdity. Simultaneously, Israel's escalations with Iran has triggered another wave of retaliatory bombings, shattering what little pretense remains of "measured" diplomacy. And in the United States, these global atrocities are filtered through a domestic burlesque: Congressional floor speeches turned into TikTok clips, humanitarian crises reduced to applause lines, and moral accountability upstaged by performance politics. This isn't hyperbole. It's the consequence of a rhetorical culture increasingly shaped by the grotesque—where excess and horror do not produce outrage, but spectacle. Where political theater is not a metaphor, but a governing mode. And yet, within this grotesque, the burlesque emerges—recasting even the most violent acts as opportunities for moral self-display. Abbott's and DeSantis's stunts were textbook examples, but we see it elsewhere too: in the ways Western governments "grieve" Palestinian lives without pausing arms shipments; in how humanitarian aid to refugee camps is broadcast as generosity while borders harden just out of frame; and in how universities invoke "free speech" to justify repression—welcoming weapons manufacturers to campus while expelling students who protest genocide.

In this context, the grotesque and burlesque are not merely literary devices but critical tools—helping us name how the boundaries of belonging are drawn, redrawn, and rhetorically staged. They offer a way to track the slippage between legality and legitimacy, outrage and orchestration. And while these frames may not offer the comfort of a redemptive arc, they do allow us to dwell in ambiguity—to recognize the absurdity without normalizing it, to feel the dissonance without rushing to resolve it. For scholars of rhetoric, they offer a vocabulary for making sense of a world where meaning itself is constantly refracted, manipulated, and staged. And in doing so, they remind us that rhetorical criticism matters—not because it restores order, but because it teaches us how to listen to chaos.

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# Teaching Face-Negotiation Theory through Celebrity Apologies

## Rachel Cabrel

*This activity helps students understand Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT) and its uses through analyzing and presenting celebrity apologies to their peers. By comparing two celebrity apologies, one from a collectivist culture and the other from an individualistic culture, students have the opportunity to better understand cultural implications for facework. Through presentations, students discuss the cultural implications of each celebrity apology, provide an analysis of stylistic choices, and examine the cultural impact on the public's reception of the apology. The presentation will also include a comparison of the collectivist and individualistic apologies chosen. Through this comparative approach, the activity provides a deeper understanding of the broader relationship between culture, communication, and facework.*

**Keywords:** *Face-Negotiation Theory, Apologies, Teaching Activity, GIFTS*

**Courses:** Interpersonal Communication, Intercultural Communication, Communication Theory

**Learning Objectives:** Students will explain the major components of Face-Negotiation Theory as they pertain to both individualistic and collectivist cultures. Students will examine and analyze Face-Negotiation Theory through a lens of cultural implications on facework.

### Introduction and Rationale

Communication theory can be difficult to grasp for some students, particularly for those just beginning their studies. This activity aims to make Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT) engaging and easier to understand for young scholars who may find communication theory complicated. By presenting material in a more approachable and relatable manner, it fosters deeper comprehension (Fryer et al., 2021). Using celebrity apologies to teach FNT gives students an opportunity to incorporate their specific interests into their work. There is a vast amount of celebrity apologies to work with — from YouTubers like Logan Paul, to Korean Pop Singers like PSY, and soccer players like Cristiano Ronaldo, each student should be able to find something to resonate with their interests. Teaching FNT through celebrity apologies connects popular culture in interesting ways and provides an opportunity to practice real life application of the theory.

Conflict is inevitable in life. FNT explains how and why different cultures approach conflict the way that they do. Managing and saving face is a critical part of human communication; it is a skill that is learned very early on. To manage or save face

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is the process of upholding personal and social reputation when conflict arises. Face, as Ting-Toomey (1988) proposes, is a cross-cultural phenomenon, but different cultures approach facework in very distinct ways. While those from collectivist cultures tend to avoid or oblige in conflicts, those who are more individualistic tend to dominate the conflict to maintain their independent, individual face within society. Celebrities are constantly trying to maintain their face, as their jobs and public image depend on it. Through this activity, students will examine how stylistic choices within celebrity conflict management align with the norms of the culture they hail from. By analyzing the cultural component of conflict management, students will develop their intercultural communication skills and recognize how cultural and societal values impact face negotiation across cultures.

*Face-Negotiation Theory*
        Face-Negotiation Theory, developed by Ting-Toomey (1988), proposes that cultural practices, particularly within individualistic and collectivist cultures, influence how people respond to conflict. FNT posits that our cultures influence how, why, and to what degree we value saving face. This is due to the variation in how each culture perceives the self, goals, and responsibility to the community at large.
Ting-Toomey builds from previous theories from scholars, like Goffman, in her work. She maintains the idea of facework as proposed by Goffman (1955), whilst adding the cultural component to her application of facework. Ting-Toomey (1988) explains that differences in approaches revolve around whether or not someone has a higher self-face concern (prioritizing one's own image), or a higher other-face concern (prioritizing the other party's image). While those from individualistic cultures tend to prioritize self-face concern, those from collectivist cultures tend to do the opposite.
        Ting-Toomey, drawing from Rahim's (1983, 1992) two-dimensional model of concern for self and concern for others, initially described five conflict styles: dominating, avoiding, obliging, compromising, and integrating. Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, and Yee-Jung (2001) later expanded the framework with three more conflict styles to better reflect cross-cultural dynamics: emotional expression, third-party help, and passive aggressive. Understanding these styles helps illustrate how culture shapes the ways people navigate and respond to conflict. Each conflict style has varying degrees of self-face concern other-face concern:

| Conflict Style | Face Concern | Key Features |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Dominating | Self | Asserting one's position |
| Obliging | Other | Giving in to the other party |
| Avoiding | Other | Withdrawing from conflict |
| Integrating | Both | Collaboration/open dialogue |
| Compromising | Both | Finding middle ground |
| Emotional Expression | Self | Expressing one's feelings |
| Passive Aggressive | Self | Indirect opposition |
| Third Party Help | Other | Involving a mediator |

**Activity Description**

*Materials*
        Faculty should ensure that students have internet access to conduct research on their respective celebrity apologies. From there, students will need access to a slideshow platform. Canva, Google Slides, and Microsoft PowerPoint are all user-friendly options providing free access with the creation of a user account.

*Preliminary Steps*
        Faculty should prepare students for this activity by either lecturing on FNT, assigning students a reading, or other instructional device, to ensure that students are familiar with the basics of the theory. Instructional materials should cover the basic assumptions of FNT with an emphasis on the difference between individualistic and collectivist approaches.

Faculty can allow students to choose the apologies, but for convenience, the following apologies are offered because they work well:

| Culture | Conflict Type | Celebrity Name | Scandal |
|---|---|---|---|
| Individualistic | Dominating | Kanye West | **2009 VMAs Incident and release of "Famous" in 2016** |
| Individualistic | Passive Aggressive | Miranda Sings (Colleen Ballinger) | **2023 Inappropriate conduct with minors** |
| Individualistic | Emotional Expression | Ellen DeGeneres | **Toxic workplace scandal** |
| Collectivist | Obliging | Fan Bingbing | **2018 Tax evasion** |
| Collectivist | Avoiding | BLACKPINK (Particularly Member Jennie) | **Cultural appropriation (Several incidents)** |
| Collectivist | Third-Party Help | Chou Tzu-Yu | **2016 Flag scandal – Apology scripted and posted by her management** |

*Activity Steps*
        This activity will take one to two class periods, in which students, in pairs or small groups, choose a celebrity scandal/apology. For this activity, a celebrity is a famous person and can have any professional background, ranging from YouTubers to politicians. Faculty might consider allowing students to use AI as a starting point for this project, as it can be useful for generating a list of celebrity scandals from both individualistic and collectivist cultures. The faculty will need to assign groups and then ensure that no celebrity is chosen twice and that each group chooses two different celebrities, one from each different cultural group (individualistic and collectivist). By doing this, repetition will be avoided, and a wider range of cultural perspectives can be

explored through the activity, allowing for rich class discussions. Depending on how in depth the faculty would like the activity to be, they can also ensure that the various groups cover each of the conflict styles proposed by Ting-Toomey. Before students create their slideshows, faculty should provide guidance on effective presentation design and set their own expectations regarding citations, what sort of content to include, etc. For example, faculty may ask students to focus on things like word choice, the delivery method of the apology (a short tweet versus a 10-minute-long YouTube video), and whether the apology feels authentic within the analysis part of the presentation.

After each group chooses two celebrity apologies, they should be given time either in or outside of class to research the apologies and the backgrounds of the celebrity apologists. Through this research, groups work collaboratively to create a slideshow presentation that explains each celebrity's apology with an in-depth analysis. Students should also be required to demonstrate whether the apology has higher levels of self-face concern, or other-face concern. From there, the students are expected to compare the apologies, providing an explanation and analysis of the theory, drawing on the celebrity's cultural background to explain why each celebrity managed the conflict the way that they did. Students will present their group work to the class, followed by a faculty-led, wrap-up conversation about FNT.

*Example*

A group might analyze Kanye West's 2009 VMAs incident and subsequent explosive reaction to said incident alongside BLACKPINK's refusal to acknowledge allegations of cultural appropriation. Students will provide background for both conflicts and then explore whether the celebrity comes from a collectivist or individualistic culture — Individualistic for Kanye (United States) and collectivist for BLACKPINK (South Korea). They will then analyze the apology/response to conflict and tie it back to the theory. West's behavior exemplifies the dominating facework style common in individualistic cultures, where maintaining self-face and asserting control often take precedence. He uses strong words, retracts his initial apology, and even takes it a step further by releasing the song "Famous" with inflammatory lyrics about Taylor Swift.

BLACKPINK's response — or lack thereof — regarding cultural appropriation allegations, can be examined through the lens of avoiding styles, which are more frequently associated with collectivist cultures. Despite appropriating and disrespecting different cultures, and even religions, BLACKPINK members have yet to address their multiple controversies as a group, deciding instead to ignore the issue entirely.
As a class, watch the Netflix documentary, "*Fyre Fraud": The Greatest Party That Never Happened*" (Gabai, Purzycki, Smith & Smith, 2019). The documentary interviews the media teams involved in the advertising and production of Fyre Festival, a luxury music festival created by entrepreneur Billy McFarland and rapper Ja Rule in 2017 that turned out to be a scam. Through an impressive promotion of the festival using Instagram influencers and major celebrities, the festival quickly gained popularity and grossed hundreds of thousands of dollars in ticket and accommodations sales. However, due to rushed and poor planning, a lack of funds, and the obtainment of a site not capable of hosting a sold-out festival, all plans for the festival were pulled. The news that the festival would not happen did not come until all patrons were already flown to the island

of Great Exuma in the Bahamas. Festival attendees were thus trapped on the island with a lack of food, transportation, and shelter temporarily.

**Debrief**

Faculty should guide a concluding discussion after the presentations emphasizing key takeaways from the activity. During this discussion, faculty can highlight key concepts of the theory, address any misunderstandings, and invite students to reflect on their work and the work of their peers. Faculty discussion questions may range from straightforward prompts like, "What did you enjoy or not enjoy about the activity?" to more reflective questions such as "What have you learned?" and "How might what you learned from this activity influence how you approach conflict management?" This is also an opportunity to address any remaining questions about the theory and lay the groundwork for applying FNT in future coursework or discussions. Depending on how in-depth faculty would like to cover FNT, this activity can be followed by other projects or an assessment. Students can be tasked with rewriting celebrity apologies to fit different conflict styles that are associated with the opposite culture. Additionally, giving students a scenario where they are asked to write an apology that would be well received by a collectivist culture and one that would be well received by an individualistic culture could have merit.

**Typical Results**

This activity allows students to learn about FNT in a way that is easily understood and engaging. It meets students where they are, allowing them to research a celebrity who is of interest to them, making FNT more engaging and comprehensible. After completing this activity, students not only understand the major components of FNT, but will also be able to apply FNT to real world situations through their understanding of cultural implications on facework.

**Alternative Formats**

In an online course, students will have the ability to plan their own time to work on the presentation, should it be assigned to a group or individuals. If the course is offered synchronously, a breakout room via Zoom, Teams, or Google Meet would be sufficient. For an asynchronous class, students can record their presentations and submit them to the faculty for credit. A discussion board post, where students present their findings and respond to their peers, may also be a suitable alternative. Students can be required to engage with the material in the same way that they would in person. Faculty may also decide to change the presentation format. Other alternatives include a podcast, vlog, TikTok video, or a written analysis.

# References

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