

A Brief Inquiry Into Online Relationships: Postmodern Theories in the Work of The 1975

The formation and development of personal relationships has shifted over the past decade and in the rise in prevalence of social media. It is no longer possible to reference and talk about relationships without acknowledging the effects of technology. Modern relationships between individuals may not be any less genuine than those preceding social media, however, by being maintained and dependent on technological and virtual means-they are inherently *different*. The English pop group, The 1975, recognizes that if artists today are going to make work about and inspired by personal relationships-whether they be romantic, political, between individuals or groups-this must be done through the scope of the effects of modern technology.

The 1975's 2018 album, *A brief Inquiry Into Online Relationships*, explores the recent shift in communications from relationships formed in person, to ones that are developed virtually. The premise of this work presents the new ways in which humans connect with one another due to this cultural shift. Through the analysis of The 1975's lyrics, visual production, and promotion of the album, I will break down the work using concepts of social media networks, postmodern strategies, appropriation, parody, mass media and mass culture.

The 1975's lead singer and lyricist Matthew Healy is a prime example of a pop star and celebrity in the modern age. Over the past near decade of mainstream success following the band, controversy and "cancellation" has followed the thirty-one year old's presence in the media. From Healy's staunch views on religion and the dominating success of his own band to

the ironic and rhetorical language used in his lyrics-there has never been a sense of vulnerability or sincerity, any gray areas, in the artist's expressions.

The first single, *Give Yourself a Try*, from the group's third studio album, proved a shift in Healy's approach to writing, releasing a song with lyrical content purely expressing the singer's reflection back on his life and what lessons he's learned thus far. Around the same time, Healy's online presence was beginning to change-opening up a dialogue of self reflection, privilege, and learning to better himself. *A Brief Inquiry Into Online Relationships*, as an album reflecting on the way modern technology shapes our relationships, is an example of the way Healy's understanding of current phenomena is evolving from contentious judgments to a more complex response and handling.

Sincerity Is Scary, the fourth single from *A Brief Inquiry...*, is a pop song addressing the habits and trends in communication on social media. These habits being defense mechanisms such as irony and sarcasm. The first verse of lyrics read:

“Irony is okay, I suppose
Culture is to blame
You try and mask your pain in the most postmodern way
You lack substance when you say something like, “Oh, what a shame”
It's just a self-referential way that stops you having to be human
I'm assuming you'll balloon when you remove the dirty spoon and
start consuming like a human, that's what I am assuming”

Healy's description of the sardonic attitudes found online creates a commentary on the effects of postmodernity on the way humans connect today. Living in a “post-enlightenment” world creates a challenge for people to handle or deal with expressing feelings sincerely, when

surrounded by skepticism, self-reference, and metacommunication (Sturken and Cartwright, 301). What we see when looking at online interactions is exactly what this song's title claims- that sincerity has in fact become a *scary* quality. These jaded attitudes becoming so common, plays a major role in the way online relationships develop differently than those formed in person.

The Man Who Married A Robot/Love Theme is the ninth track on the album and features a monologue performed by Apple's virtual assistant, Siri (British male). Siri tells the "story of a lonely, lonely man", detailing the life of a man who's dependent on the internet-

"The internet, as you know,
was his friend- you could say, his best
friend. They would play with each other every day, watching
videos of humans doing all sorts of things: Having sex with each
other; Informing people on what was wrong with them and their
life (...)"

The man in question is named "@SnowflakeSmasher86," a reference to social media users who are politically and socially right-leaning. The only identity given to the subject being a username lends to the narrative of someone whose identity is fully wrapped up in the internet. Using the voice of Siri changes the effect of the story being told, considering Marshall McLuhan's claim that medium affects the message (Sturken and Cartwright, 220). It must be taken into consideration Siri's role as an extension of ourselves, a medium that becomes personified and therefore shifts the way we interact with it. This can also be interpreted as a sort of eulogy for @SnowflakeSmasher86 as the end of the monologue announces his death and invites listeners to find him on Facebook.

The references and actions described in the song not only detail a close bond formed between this man and virtual assistant, but the language used to describe them, from Siri's point of view, highlights how different this relationship is, as compared to a relationship between two humans. Healy selects language like "He would get him cooked animals and show him the people having sex again," in place of what we might refer to as ordering food and watching pornography, to make the relationship feel more artificial and uncomfortable.

A Brief Inquiry...also makes a point to look at the relationship we have with each other as groups, often in a political context. The music video for track *Love It If We Made It* collages clips of footage from news headlines over the course of a year (between 2017 and 2018). This footage captures the exchange between mass media and the resulting idea of mass culture and society by referencing global media events (Sturken and Cartwright, 223; 247). All of the referenced events are ones of a violent nature-war, humanitarian issues, demonstrations by hate groups, the effects of climate change, etc. (Fig. A through D) Our relationships are formed amongst this feed of news and therefore influences *who* we interact with and *how* we interact with them-we are all acting and responding to the same mass media, but in various ways. These appropriated clips are spliced around the chorus of the song, which reads in bright neon text "Modernity has failed us, And I'd love it if we made it" (Fig. E). The phrase "Love it if we made it" read alongside misogynistic quotes from Donald Trump (Fig. F) and references to police brutality creates a juxtaposition between the jaded imagery capturing a postmodern culture and the resilience of humanity.

In the promotion of the album, The 1975 released a series of four images (Fig. G) formatted like advertisement posters, on their website. Each image has white text plastered over

it-the first being an image of a selfie taken by a group of celebrities at the Oscars in 2014. All of the faces in the photo are pixelated except for one man in the back-actor Kevin Spacey, who's reputation was tarnished after being accused of sexual assault in the wake of the #MeToo movement. On top of the image reads "Soon to be picturesque ruins". The second image is of a group of pre-teens on their phones in a museum, the text on top of this image reads "Isaiah 6:9-10". The third poster, an image of a man and woman holding hands with text that reads "planned obsolescence," and the last featuring a photo of a toddler wearing an oversized virtual reality headset, with the phrase "modernity has failed us".

The first poster is referring to the "cancel culture" online, and the potential overnight downfall of someone's celebrity status. The Bible verse quoted in the second image references God telling prophet Isaiah to persuade people to open their eyes, ears, and hearts to Him without any perception or comprehension-paired with an image of heads in unison staring down at cell phones, furthers the critique of our use of technology-one that is blindly leaned on and lacking in critical thought-similar to concepts of religious faith. The "Planned obsolescence" of hand-holding and young children wearing escapist VR headsets both push the idea that, in a postmodern world full of technological human extensions, human connection has shifted completely.

The 1975's album *A Brief Inquiry Into Online Relationships* explores the different ways in which our dependence on and interactions with the internet and new media affects the nature of our relationships today-whether they are romantic, social, or political. Postmodern strategies, media theories like those of Marshall McLuhan, and ideas of mass media and culture are all approaches that can be taken to break down and analyze the ways in which this pop group forms

their critique and raises questions about the ever evolving role of media in our communication with one another.

Works Cited

The 1975. *A Brief Inquiry Into Online Relationships* Dirty Hit Records, Polydor Records, 2018.

“The 1975.” *The 1975*, the1975.com/.

“Chapter Eight: Postmodernism: Irony, Parody, and Pastiche.” *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture*, by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, Oxford University Press, 2018.

“Chapter Six: Media in Everyday Life.” *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture*, by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 220.

“Glossary.” *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture*, by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 440–440.

“Isaiah 6 Bible Commentary.” *Isaiah 6 Bible Commentary - Matthew Henry (Concise)*, www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com=mhc&b=23&c=6.

Rylander, Tobias, and Matthew Healy. *The 1975 - Love It If We Made It (Official Video)*. *YouTube*, The 1975, 15 Oct. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wl1B7DPegc.

Image List:



Fig. A

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wl1B7DPegc>



Fig. B



Fig. C

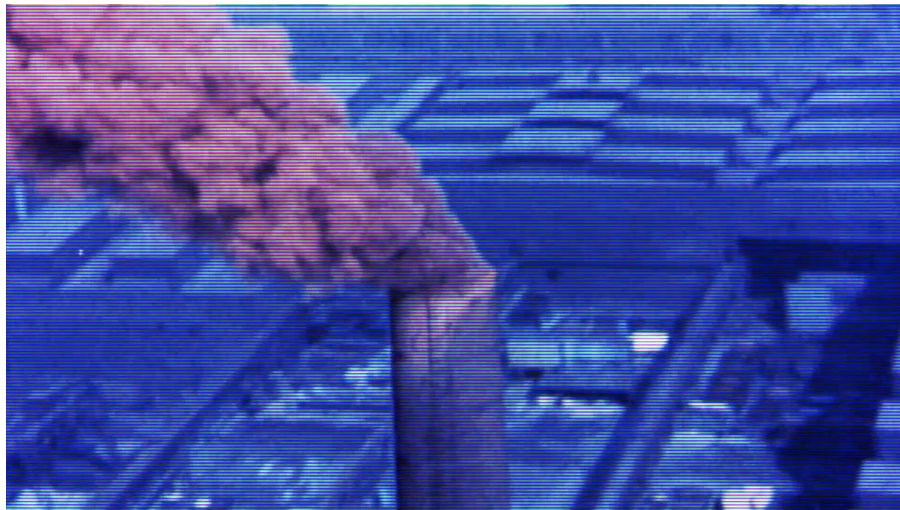


Fig. D



Fig. E



Fig. F

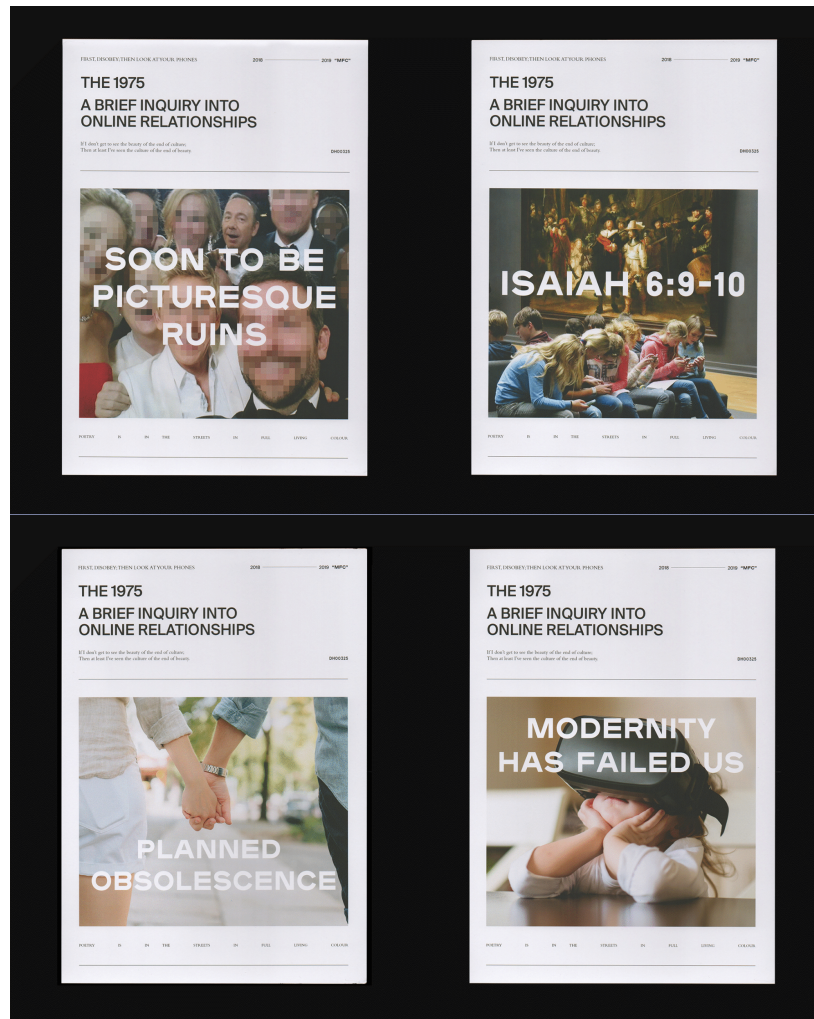


Fig. G