"The Brain Melt Is Real": On Student and Instructor Notions of Digital Technology-Induced Distractedness at McMaster University

By

Robert James Mitchell

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Abstract

This thesis examines the rapid expansion of the 'discourse of distraction,' which I define as a widespread public perception that students who grew up with access to digital activities are unable to concentrate on academic tasks, and, that such activities in adulthood are distracting. Based on a literature review and semi-structured interviews with Social Sciences undergraduate students and faculty at McMaster University, I argue that the contemporary socio-political environment of universities has facilitated the utilization of digital technologies in a manner which is harmful students' ability to concentrate. I also argue that digital technologies impact various socio-cultural dimensions of the university. Finally, I suggest that the discourse of distraction has sufficient force to change how people interact with digital technology and schoolwork altogether.

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Author: Robert James Mitchell, B.A. Hon. (McMaster University)

Supervisor: Dr. K. McGarry

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McMaster University Department of Anthropology, Hamilton, Ontario

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Declaration of Academic Achievement

The research contained in this thesis was completed by Robert Mitchell under the supervision of Dr. Karen McGarry and Dr. Cal Biruk. Ethics approval was granted by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) under the title “Researching Emerging Educational Technologies” (ID# 6476).

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

> [My students] were not, with a few exceptions, readers … They had always occupied themselves with music, TV, and videos.
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> - Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, 19

No doubt you have at one point come across somebody claiming that the brightly lit digital environment produced by computer technologies is playing a part in, or more perniciously, is causing students to suffer from a lack of concentration on their schoolwork. This tendency toward distraction is perceived to have caused education's standards to fall and has also made the current generation of young people act impulsively with limited critical thinking abilities. Maybe you too have told these same kinds of stories. Even scholarship of social generations has devised a variety of names to classify these distractible youngsters: the *Snowflake Generation*, *21st Century Learners*, the *iGeneration*, the *Internet Generation*, the *Nintendo Generation*, the *Anxious Generation*, *Digital Natives*, and *Zoomers* (Zavodna & Falch 2022, 6; Twenge 2017; Ladd 2006; Haidt 2023, 2024). This shortlist of names given for the newest generations is quite explicit in claiming that there is not only some kind of connection between computers, individualism, consumerism, and frenetic behaviour, but that these qualities are the defining traits of today's young people.

Though the practice of essentializing an entire generation may come across as callous, it should be noted that classifications of this kind are commonplace in public discourses concerning a perceived societal transformation. It is true that most of these names existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, however, this event amplified the discourse that individuals interacting with computer technologies play a role in distracting people from educational things; more

specifically, that young people are distracted from things which are deemed important, such as schoolwork, by things deemed trivial, such as texting friends and playing games on their phones and laptop computers. I refer to the general public's reproduction of this idea as the 'discourse of distraction.'

In this thesis, I will explore how the discourse of distraction colours how educators, scholars, and the public imagine today's students. I argue that this discourse is important to research, as it influences decision making ranging from how students will choose to study and spend their time, to governmental educational policy. In order to study this discourse, I conducted informal, semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students and instructors in the Faculty of Social Sciences at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, concerning their experience using digital technology in educational and recreational contexts, particularly in light of COVID-19 which thrust school into an exclusively online context starting in March 2020. Yet, once public health deemed it safe to return to in-person classrooms, the penchant for digital pedagogy managed to persist.

Education and Public Policy in Ontario

It is worth highlighting that there are other concurrent trends with the increased use of digital technology in the classroom. Notably, academics largely agree that higher education institutions around the world have become increasingly commercialized by increased student tuition, an emphasis on marketing education as a 'product', vocationalization, and the adoption of rigorous management practices (Parker & Jary 1995, 320; Shore & Wright 1999). However, it is worth examining the broader Canadian political context in which this happened. Unlike the case of the United States, most Canadian universities are public institutions which makes them highly subject to government change and policy. Canadian public policy began a neoliberal turn

in the 1980s, in line with policies in the United States which were officially purported to lull their inflationary crisis (Carroll and Shaw 2001, 199), though critics have since pointed out that such policies have enforced social inequality and identitarianism (Slobodian 2021). Though the seeds were sown in the 1980s, it was not until Ontario premier Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution" of 1995 that tenets of full-fledged neoliberalism became entrenched in Ontario's public policy (Dougherty & Netow 2020, 461). According to Henry Giroux (2005:2), neoliberalism is guided by "the belief that the market should be the organizing principle for all political, social, and economic decisions." Its "tool-kit" of policies include things like free trade, austerity to social welfare programs, deregulation and privatization of state assets (4, 6). Some of these policies have negligible impact on higher education, while others have immediate ramifications. For simplicity's sake, in this thesis I consider neoliberalism to be an individual or organizational orientation towards prioritizing commercial success through the expansion of accounting and markets into realms of every-day life where they were previously not conceptualized as necessary. This transformation may be guided by public policy. For example, neoliberal policy affects universities by encouraging a student-as-client model to increase revenue, thus, emphasizing a market-oriented approach (Dougherty & Netow 2020, 459; Allahar & Cote 2007, 24). Furthermore, neoliberalism emphasizes a pedagogy of commercial success on an individual level for students by concentrating on vocational skillsets and job-specific training to help with future employment prospects. Another more ideological case of neoliberal policy was the United Kingdom banning curricula which spreads "bias against businesses and enterprise" (Parker and Jary 1995, 322).

As public institutions, Canadian universities receive the largest share of their budget from governments. As of 2022, universities receive about 46% of their operating revenue from

provincial and federal governments, while tuition accounts for only 32.5% of their budget (Statistics Canada 2023). However, in the past, public funding accounted for a much larger sum compared to what it does today. The historically high tuition burden for students, as well as the high reliance on tuition for university institutions, creates a delicate situation that each interest group must adapt to. Yet, the trend towards increased student burden was briefly halted in 2019 when the Ontario provincial government implemented a freeze to tuition increases, and even a cut for some students' tuition (CBC News 2024, Feb 26th). According to a government commissioned report about the financial health of the higher education sector, this tuition freeze policy was a "significant threat" to the finances of Ontarian universities as these losses were not mitigated by an increase in public funding (Council of Ontario Universities 2024). Due to this threat, the provincial government implemented a $1.2 billion CAD stimulus package to secure economic viability for its universities, which was a far cry from the original report which recommended nearly double this amount, $2.3 billion dollars, to make up for the lost tuition revenue.

At a glance, this move appears to be aligned against neoliberal policy as the provincial government did, in fact, shift the financial burden onto itself and away from students as a reversal to austerity of public institutions. There are, however, caveats. Of the $1.2 billion dollars, $15 million will go toward paying for "third-party reviews that will identify actions institutions can take to drive long-term cost savings and positive outcomes for students and communities" (Government of Ontario 2024, February 26th). $65.4 million will "refresh infrastructure and repair … Ontario's Advanced Research Computing systems," while $100 million will "support STEM program costs." Like any other gift, this stimulus package comes with strings attached. In this case, it includes macrolevel planning of university policy, regardless

of institutional discretion, to prioritize things such as long-term cost savings, refreshing expensive computer systems, and supporting STEM programs. Thus, even as this policy skews the financial burden toward public funds, the money is used in a way that emphasizes commercial viability by expanding markets for students: through STEM, which is deemed more economically productive by facilitating a higher future earning power when compared with humanities or social science degrees (Knox 2023), through computers, and through long-term cost savings.

A symptom of neoliberal policy has been that enrolment in Social Sciences and Humanities faculties has declined in recent years (Heller 2023), which also happens to be the case at McMaster when compared with other faculties, such as the Faculty of Business. However, student enrolment varies by individual department or program in the social sciences. This phenomenon can possibly be attributed to its relatively lesser funding; however, it is also true that university students themselves are increasingly interested in professionalization compared to "learning for learning's sake", according to the Canadian polling institution Academica (Crocker, Hall, & Jazen March 7th, 2023). Academica reported that as of 2023, the most commonly cited reason that students apply to post-secondary is the vocational interest of "preparation for a chosen career" which now sits ahead of more classical reasons for applying to schools, such as "personal and intellectual growth" or "wanting to cultivate a deeper understanding of an academic field" (Crocker, Hall, & Jazen March 7th, 2023). As such, government policy and student desires are mostly aligned, or at least, they influence one another.

Therefore, universities in Canada have reason to emphasize education-as-professionalization, especially when compared to their past. Norman Lucas (2018) points out that universities and colleges see higher enrolments during periods of youth unemployment, which in

England occurred in the 1970s and governments responded with policies such as the "Youth Training Schemes" or "Youth Opportunities Scheme" to increase enrolment (134-135). In the United States, the GI Bill funded college for World War 2 servicepeople, which Susan Blum (2016) posits was a policy intended to stop civic unrest in the country by reducing the "high rates of unemployment" (98). Thus, in other political contexts, higher education functions not only to develop skills and 'learn for learning's sake', but to curb social dissatisfaction with unemployment. In Canada, a university degree has long been associated with employability, based on policy and student attestation. Look no further than the language that the Government of Ontario uses: A COVID-era press release (March 19th, 2021) highlighted that a university degree is a sound investment as it returns $1.36 for every dollar spent, so it is 'worth it' to invest. As such, policies which financially support higher education institutions are rooted in the logic of "creating jobs" rather than training individual skills or learning for learning's sake.

The Ontario government's report which suggested the $2.3 billion dollar stimulus package concluded that "Ontario's universities are driving jobs and growth in communities throughout Ontario … through research, innovation and commercialization" (Council of Ontario Universities 2024, 1). Since it is the case that government funding prioritizes job creation, it is logical for funding to skew towards degrees that are most clearly associated with financial returns for its graduates. In this thesis, I take an interest in the Faculty of Social Sciences at McMaster University, which is an example of a faculty that has faced challenges under neoliberal policies due to its lack of an immediate utility in the labour market when compared with other faculties such as business or science. Thus, social science does not provide the best 'return on investment' concerning job creation (Knox 2023). Later, I argue that the emergence of the discourse of distraction has everything to do with this shift in educational policy: that it is a

byproduct of the societal emphasis on market rationalities clashing with traditional modalities of pedagogy, as the skills relevant to certain academic disciplines, such as the social sciences, do not focus commercial viability as primary.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the action of being distracted may hypothetically be the norm in a society which values quantity and output over quality and care. Yet, the reception of scholarly work has classically valued quality to an extreme. Thus, being distracted becomes a social quality which the public does not associate with scholarly activity. Inversely, regardless of if it happens to be the case or not, a student embodying concentration is imagined to be a good student.

Outline of Chapters

In the second chapter, I review the methods I used to study student interaction with online school, with a particular focus on students' experiences during COVID-19 public health instructions which led to courses being moved online. I began this research by conducting semi-structured, open-ended interviews with sixteen undergraduate students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. In addition to these, I held shorter informal interviews with Social Science instructors to provide context for student experiences. I argue that a qualitative approach is pertinent to the study of student interaction with digital technologies, as qualitative research may capture students' sensibilities and perspectives on this topic. Indeed, research that uses purely quantitative methods to study students has no hope of capturing the individuality and creativity of students. Given that studying interactions with computers has historically been an area focused on quantitative data, qualitative research that underscores a student perspective on digital technology in education has been hard to come by. I draw upon literature which argues that because computers are high-tech devices, 'soft'

ethnographic data or political theory is relegated below the expert voices of computer scientists or quantitative research experts. Furthermore, I argue that scholarship of education has problematically de-centred a student perspective. Then, I draw upon anthropological theory to demonstrate how student perspectives have the potential to usefully uncover lived realities, even if such a perspective has previously been limited by perceiving students-as-customers. Much of the existing educational literature consists of instructors (who, by virtue of their positions, already excelled at school) providing commentary on what their students are doing, rather than prioritizing the insights of the students themselves. I underscore why my own positionality as a student doing this research influences the outcome of the project. Additionally, I provide some reasoning as to why this topic is interesting to me. Finally, I explain why I chose the demographic of social science undergraduate students for this research.

Next, in Chapter 3, I highlight notable and definitional theories on how the tech-induced transformation of students occurs in order to critically highlight how the discourse of distraction comes to colour accounts of students interacting with various digital technologies. I argue that regardless of whether or not digital technologies rewire the brain's neuroplasticity (Haidt 2024), this very idea influences how one imagines a 'student' as a discursive category. Of course, COVID-19 necessitated Canadian classrooms to be moved online, but the discourse connecting distracted young people with digital technology existed long before online classes temporarily became the norm through public health restrictions. Throughout this chapter, I highlight the contributions of academic researchers and social theorists who argue that digital technologies have fundamentally changed the behaviour of their students and young people more broadly. I connect this with Mary Douglas's (1966) concept of pollution to argue that 'distracted students' are imagined to be a social problem that violates social mores.

In Chapter 4 I balance the public-academic commentary side of this discourse with the ethnographic findings from my interviews with students and instructors at the university. These important personal accounts certainly do not wholly reject the implications of the discourse of distraction but are also loath to embrace the idea that they, as students, are incompetent and irreversibly changed by digital technologies. I note that students express a variety of different opinions about interacting with digital technologies and online school, and that they fail to embody the essentialist category they are imagined to be. However, students do largely agree with the fact that engaging with computer technologies can hinder their study habits as they offer easy distractions from hard schoolwork. Among other things, I draw upon marketing scholarship to argue that in the contemporary neoliberal climate of education there is a link between the language of advertising and the expectations one has for their schooling. Furthermore, I lay out how students describe interacting with social media software on cell phones using the same adjectives they use to describe school, but that students find online social worlds to be lacking meaning in comparison with those which are not virtual.

Finally, the concluding chapter provides a synopsis of the main arguments in thesis. I expand on how the emergence of a discourse can influence real-life activity. The same goes for activity on the Internet—ostensibly virtual, though it colours real-life worlds. I also connect Adorno's (1991) analytic of 'free time' as being like time spent on social media platforms. To conclude, I argue that 'higher education' is a useful technical term as it implies that the ability to communicate and receive information at a 'higher' level exceeds simplistic understanding. Though this idea may seem banal, I demonstrate that schools have an ongoing tendency towards simplistic understanding of course material against deeper, nuanced understandings.

CHAPTER 2: Methodology and Approach

"The yearning for rigidity is in us all. It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts."

- Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 163

The primary research for this thesis is based on informal, semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at McMaster University. To a classically trained social scientist, this may appear non-ethnographic because I am a student at this particular university. Ethnographic research originated in the late 19th century as an individual researcher assessing a social situation which was geographically distant from the ethnographer's own. This notion of anthropology's interest in what it deems unfamiliar has been demonstrably problematic and is now thought to be antiquated. Classical anthropological research was based in colonial settings and indeed employed a colonial framework for thinking about culture (Narayan 1993). Over time this has changed, and it is now common practice to study the immediate society which one is situated within.

According to the American Anthropological Association (2004), contemporary ethnography still takes interest in studying cultural systems or aspects of them but is no longer concerned with abstract social 'distance' between the researcher and their region of study. Contemporary ethnography varies; it can be defined as broadly as "focused discussions with community members" to "analysis of texts" (AAA Executive Board 2004). These two are the basic methods I employed for this research, by examining how the student body interacts with the discursive literature which uses them as a subject.

According to older theory, an individual whose perspective is situated from within a culture was previously referred to as an ‘emic’ perspective. Throughout this earlier anthropological research, the emic perspective was purported to offer the most detail about specific cultural practices, because this individual participates in these practices all the time and therefore, they are a part of integrating the practices socially. But because these are everyday occurrences for this person, they will not understand the value in analyzing these events as meaningful towards the ‘functionality’ of practices. Based on this logic, anthropology has historically sought a what is called an ‘etic’ perspective. This is an outsider perspective, which purportedly becomes valuable since such an individual will not be excessively familiar with many of the intricacies of cultural practices; they will therefore be able to interpret society and “discover patterns” (Harris 1976, 330) impartially because their outsider positionality was purported to make them scientific in their analysis. This line of argument has since been rebuked. For example, Marvin Harris and other anthropologists writing before the 1990s suggest that the etic perspective is a requirement to produce anthropological knowledge. Yet, if this is the case, in the context of the research project that I undertook, my positionality as an emic researcher would be a huge problem, as I am possibly too aware of everyday occurrences for undergraduate students at McMaster to find meaning in them. However, I question the premise that an emic perspective is not able to provide meaningful insight on societal practices. In the next chapter of this thesis, I question the truthfulness of an interaction between a professor and his student. The professor asks a student why he is wearing headphones in class, and then the student tells him that he isn’t playing any sound through the headphones, he just likes having them in for comfort. The professor believes him, exemplifying the outsider approach. My so-called emic positionality as a student tells me that this headphone-wearing student was almost certainly lying about not

listening to music to avoid negative repercussions. In this instance the emic approach brings different insights than the scientific-outsider etic position does, which enables this research to hold a different perspective.

Anthropological theory since the emic and etic dichotomy's stronghold on this discipline has questioned the validity of emic and etic categories as being methodologically problematic and logically flawed. Lila Abu-Lughod (1991:53) argues that such an ideology embraces a decontextualized and depoliticized world. Furthermore, Laura Nader (1973:23) highlights how such a dichotomy forestalled the analysis of powerful organizations, which has since become a staple of anthropological research. In the context of my research, emic and etic positionalities are a false dichotomy because identities are not concrete the way the words 'insider' and 'outsider' are (Narayan 1993). A hypothetical student as a subject may be more-or-less alike to an essentialist trope of a student, though never perfectly fulfilling the ideal. That imaginary student may or may not be perceived as 'authentic' enough to represent the category of 'student': although one part of their identity is being a student, identity also relates to an ethnicity, a gender, sexuality, employment, age… extending indefinitely. Furthermore, the student's position may be questioned by the emic and etic dichotomy as best-embodying all the insider qualities to appropriately represent student culture: is the emic student only a first-year student? Do they have good enough grades to provide the most authentic student perspective? Do they work a job on the weekend, or have a life outside of school? All of these questions are left unasked by the insider/outsider or emic/etic dichotomy. For these reasons I reject that a fruitful investigation of a social phenomenon requires an outsider perspective. Though there is a plethora of theory that rejects anthropology as the study of distant outsiders, later in this chapter I note that

anthropologists have yet to catch up to other disciplines in the study of education due to their role as instructors.

To gather individual perceptions of online school, its efficacy, and ideas associated with a societal trend towards distraction, I interviewed undergraduate students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at McMaster, as well as some of its professors. All in all, sixteen interviews with students were conducted on the nature of their experiences with online education over the COVID-era but also their experiences with using digital technology at school and recreationally. Additionally, six professors were interviewed about their perceptions of students before and during the COVID pandemic. To provide anonymity to the research participants, I use pseudonyms for all their names. The interviews with students ranged from about thirty minutes to ninety minutes in length, whereas the interviews with instructors lasted about twenty to thirty minutes.

This research was approved by McMaster's Research Ethics Board, titled "Evaluating Emerging Educational Technologies" (#6476). My research questions are open-ended with the goal of allowing for subjectivity and valuing individual perceptions in the responses of the research participants as I attempted to build an argument without necessarily asserting that online school is empirically better-or-worse at facilitating learning. Therefore, this research is not prescriptive. As we will see in the next chapter, much of the preexisting literature concerning the Internet's association with distraction uses quantitative research to a flaw as it they generally overextend the possibilities of numbers. Later, I highlight how the obsession over better-or-worse learning outcomes are difficult to concretely define, which leads to a debate mired by causal inference and other problematic conclusions. For example, scholars argue that lower standardized test results in schools (U.S. Department of Education, various years) are explained

by students being inattentive due to their interaction with cell phones in classrooms and computers at home. This is a bold claim as it is essentially asserted using only statistical trends. To avoid such methodological overextensions, my research is instead interested in utilizing subjective evaluations that students and professors hold to establish a narrative about the interaction between students and technological devices such as cell phones and computers. These insights are then analyzed to uncover implications that this discourse holds. However, later in this thesis I underscore literature which suggests that certain social spaces and technologies hold intrinsic qualities.

To begin, I recruited student participants for this research by asking some instructors I already had rapport with if I could come to their lectures and advertise this research project. Additionally, I asked other instructors to post information about my project on their course pages. I put up posters around the university to recruit participants to my research, and although the little tags with my contact information were mostly gone after a month, no one contacted me this way. The only students who contacted me ended up being students whose instructors had advertised the research.

The interviews with students were on a purely voluntary basis, as there was no economic incentive provided for participating. The only incentive independent of genuine interest in the topic that I can think of was that students could learn about the method of ethnographic research. Because the only motivating factor for participating in this research is an intrinsic one, the students who ended up participating are biased in that they may have participated because they are opinionated about the way that technologies have been implemented in their learning environments. To these students, this topic is not a politically neutral topic to be dismissed, instead, the integration of education and digital technology has had an important impact on their

lives. For example, one student explicitly commented on how helpful online school has been for her due to a disability. On the other hand, Charlotte, an undergraduate student, confessed to me that "the topic of online school has been on my mind for a very long time. But I never had the opportunity to talk about it, no one brings it up. In high school, we preferred not to talk about it. It was never asked to us if you were OK with everything being online." Charlotte had a lot of meaningful things to say about online school, but she felt that nobody cared that she did not like it because nothing could be changed. She felt as though people generally did not want to talk about online school because they did not want to complain and be seen as a negative person in an already stressful situation. I think that this statement fairly sums up the perspective that students had: Whether online classes were a good thing or a bad thing, they were excited to share their opinions because they perceived that other people were ignoring something that was worth discussing. Thus, it is fair to say that the sample population for this research was not 'neutral', although, I would rather frame it to say that the students who volunteered were not apathetic.

The research project's advertising materials advised students to participate by sharing their journey managing the changes that online school brought them, but also sharing "experiences using educational technologies that are unorthodox in nature, exemplified by online lectures, online modules and learning platforms (D2L), podcasts, games, comics, social media, Power-Points." An argument of this thesis is that the public perceives the performance of students to be getting worse over time, and that this decline in achievement should be remedied by updating pedagogy to be more 'modern' and take place in the distinctly-stratified 21st century (remember, according to some, people born after 1995 have been defined as "21st century learners" [Zavodna & Falch 2022, 6], distinguishing them from how pre-1995 humans learned). Traditional types of assignments in a social sciences-based education include things like take-

home essays or an essay exam, oral participation in seminars and tutorial sessions, and other assignments that generally assess course knowledge. But it is becoming clear that classical assignment types are no longer the norm, if they ever were. In the most recent class I was marking for, students would submit assignments in PowerPoint format instead of writing traditional essays. This would mimic presenting a lecture, and it also gives more weight to form, thereby reorientating the learned skills of the assignment toward a different type of education. Alternatively, for this same assignment, students could choose to submit a video essay, which happens to be a bit more traditional in content although its aesthetic is digitally modern. Indeed, the medium of watching videos is more *fun* than reading is, as Sven Birkerts asserted as early as 1994 in *The Gutenberg Elegies*. Furthermore, the medium of a video essay assignment is perceived to be a more 'engaging' version of writing because it incorporates more sensorial stimulation, but importantly, it is also similar to contemporary forms of entertainment. As I will later note in the Literature Review chapter, the idea of modernizing academic assignment mediums is part and parcel of the idea that students are becoming more distracted.

Approach and Autoethnography

Over the period in which university classes were pushed online due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, I was an undergraduate student in my second year at McMaster University. The transition started in March 2020, and it was swift and messy. Instructors had different ideas of how to best implement the remainder of classes. There were only a few weeks left, so generally, the instructors would post pre-recorded lectures and publish them to Avenue to Learn (McMaster's D2L-based online learning platform) as videos. If this did not happen, the lectures were not published at all, so the pandemic became an invitation to an easier exam and an early summer.

After a while the seminars and tutorials were shifted to *Zoom.* At first this made tutorials more awkward, as people did not really know how to start talking about that week's topic. These sessions would follow a similar structure each week: the instructor would prompt the rest of the class to say something about the readings, and after a longer than normally warranted pause, a student would respond, then after another pause to make sure that their point was finished, the instructor would deliberate on that statement, then, the conversation would continue at this unusual pace. The conversational pace at the early stages of online classes was much slower compared to the ones happening in-person only weeks before. But after months of adjusting to the online environment, the social cues evolved to make the seminars and tutorials seem more natural. Practices worked themselves out to facilitate less interruption and faster conversation, like raising a virtual hand to be put into a speaking queue while the atmosphere could be gauged by how many thumbs-up emoticons flooded the chat box.

Finally after nearly two years of strictly online school, my final year moved back to an in-person format. For me it was a welcome departure from looking at a screen for three hours straight. Once I returned to the physical classroom, I got to talk to people whose name and voice I was familiar with, but whom I had never actually seen before. This fact was the simplest prompt for small talk, where you would say something like "it's funny to actually meet you" or "it's nice to actually be in a classroom." From there, the conversation often led to distinguishing between online and in-person school; is it good, bad, or even noticeably different? I became interested in the polarizing discussions that took place around these prompts, whether I was a participant in conversation or overhearing others talk before class. I perceived that my peers seemed only to either hate online classes, or else only speak fondly of them, without too much space in between these two positions. At the time I thought the dichotomous nature of these

discussions was an interesting phenomenon itself. This prompted my decision to write a Master's thesis in anthropology about the topic, as these conversations were already a very crude study of the environment that I found myself entangled in.

Even though I describe the online classroom as awkward, I didn't dislike the online environment enough to drop out of school. In fact, I liked it enough to want to go to graduate school. On the other hand, the initial idea I had of online school captured by the phrase "it's funny to *actually* meet you," which implies that talking to people over the Internet is less real than talking to them in-person, is a first impression that stuck without me throughout my research, and I expand on the 'realness' of online interactions in Chapter 4.

Throughout the ongoing interview phase of research I continued studying this topic by reading anything that pertains to education, computers, cell phones, the Internet, social generations, students, and distraction. I prioritized reading academic literature, but I also read editorials, non-academic books, newspaper articles, census data, and I listened to podcasts. Reading non-scholarly essays became critical to balance perspectives, as they are aimed at a larger audience than academic papers, and part of this thesis' central argument is that the general public is concerned about the quick spread of Internet-accessing devices as a moral issue because, as we will later see, popular and academic media reinforces a trope that there is an association between online activity and distracted or frenetic behaviour. Furthermore, academic scholarship as well as articles aimed for a public audience often implicitly posit that digital technology is exceedingly complicated and too confusing for non-experts like myself. Evgeny Morozov (2013) highlights how the genre of literature concerning the Internet is plagued by the idea that digital technology has an aura only visible to its so-called experts. He argues that the aura of techno-complexity makes laypersons without a scientific background appear to be unable

to offer useful insights on such a highly technical subject matter (18). This dichotomy of expert knowledge and lay knowledge also prioritizes hard data over other disciplinary structures such as philosophy, political theory, or ethnographic methods. This is unfortunate, because these soft-analytical approaches can contextualize the hard data that psychologists, demographers, and whoever else create. The Internet's aura depoliticizes it, as one tech blogger put it: "All too many U.S. lawmakers are barely beyond the stage of thinking that the Internet is a collection of tubes; do we really want these guys to tell Facebook or any other social media company how to run its business?" (18). Of course, the idea of Facebook as a neutral entity that should therefore be immune from political regulation is comical, especially in hindsight as the company has been under fire for its involvement in political scandals like the Cambridge-Analytica data scandal and Facebook's parent company's purported design of 'addictive' products (Rosalie Chan 2019, October 5th, Business Insider. Vanessa Balintec 2024, March 28th, CBC News). Imagining computers and the Internet as existing in a realm in which only technological expertise is relevant is demonstratively a disaster; the Internet is not actually unbounded from the rest of the world even though it has frequently been imagined as such. Because an ethnographic perspective is shuttered away from this discourse which attempts to appear scientific thus seemingly neutral, I hope to provide voice to students who have otherwise been perceived as laypeople with no authority on the subject matter because of their non-expert status, even though they were ground-zero for online education and all educational policies more broadly.

Student voices have been also devalued in teaching literature because of the non-expert status of students. Much of the preexisting critique of silencing student voices comes from the critical pedagogy school of the 1970s which theorizes that the teacher-student dichotomy establishes that the teacher knows about things that are intellectually valid whereas the student

does not due to their hierarchical relationship (Freire 1970). Yet, there are further elements which complicate this relationship, indeed, there are even good reasons for critiquing student perspectives in academic literature. Independent of critical pedagogy, there are myriad problematic reasons which explain why student perspectives have been underrepresented.

If a student is anything like how students are represented in popular media as being lazy when it comes to studying and over-the-top when it comes to recreation, then this imagined perspective is grim. While I personally do not believe such juvenile representations to be accurate, many serious scholars do (Blum 2016, 56). Regardless, there should be some nuance at hand to establish what a useful student perspective looks like in order to avoid basic misinterpretations. Students' perspectives have historically been devalued due to their lack of authority and power, but in the increasingly neoliberal education model, contemporary students probably have more power over institutions than any of their prior cohorts ever did. If left unchecked, students might have an interest toward becoming credential-seeking customers as opposed to enrolling in school for the sake of learning skills (Cote and Allahar 2007, 25). Indeed, if students-as-customers follow the "logic of commercialism," then the student as a paying customer is "always right" (32). The outcome of this student perspective would be to assign every student an A+ and a diploma simply for paying tuition, rather than distributing these things based on ability and intellect. This commercialist maxim is wholly out of place in an educational setting, which has had the unfortunate side effect of distancing student voices from being underrepresented in scholarship.

Furthermore, research has also shown that the immediate student evaluations of professors is unfair to the learning process and even downright discriminatory to instructors. For one, students evaluate professors who they perceive as men significantly higher than professors

perceived as women: In a study by Lillian MacNell, Adam Driscoll and Andrea Hunt (2015), the instructor of an online-only class was either represented as a man or a woman regardless of their actual sex (their appearance was never revealed). Though the anonymized women instructors scored better in student evaluations, those who were *perceived* to be men by their students scored 4.24 out of 5 on student evaluations compared to the 3.7 that women-perceived instructors received. In another unfair example, Riniolo et al. (2006) found that the most physically attractive instructors at two American universities received a rating *0.8 higher* on a five-point scale than their colleagues (19). I will expand on the unfairness of student evaluations in Chapter 4, but for now it should be clear that students can be swayed by completely irrelevant factors when evaluating teaching performance that leads to incorrect and problematic assessments.

Despite student evaluations providing problematic data for the design of educational policies, I think that most students have an intrinsic interest in learning things and are going to school to further their education and skill development. Still, the problematic factors with a student perspective should be highlighted because they demonstrate real issues; one which emphasizes immediate gratification (mirroring corporate neoliberal policy which maximizes immediate returns at the expense of long-term stability) that legitimates practicing a watered-down version of teaching. Some of the students I spoke with admitted that they 'game' the marking system in order to achieve the highest grade with the least amount of effort, or that they have cheated in the past thanks to online tests. Small things like this should not be cause for a total devaluation of student voices. Instead of moralizing about cheating, as a method, I attribute things like this to a systemic flaw which prioritizes results instead of process. The university, its students, and its instructors can be conceptualized as three groups with their own interests. Instead of erasing the voices of students by and large because they cheat, unfairly evaluate

instructors (and education altogether), all while seeking credentials as paying customers, these issues should be recognized or else risk that student voices continue to be perceived as illegitimate which would further what Henry Giroux (2013) terms the "war on youth". So long as instructors, who are publishing scholarly texts on this topic, devalue a student perspective, the actual people who teach with be left out of communication between the university and the students, leading to a proliferation of mechanisms which dumb-down higher education. By questioning the popular representations of students, this research project finds value in this oft-criticized positionality because it is equally clear that students also provide pertinent, interesting, and creative insights about the school system that they are a part of, and ignoring these insights has proven itself to be problematic by creating distance between students and the rest of academia.

In light of the problems ingrained within a student perspective on education, I attempt to take student attestations seriously, though not always literally. Often, this comes down to the vocabulary of students—it is important to note, as Edith, a 1st year Humanities and Social Sciences student does, that academic writing employs more polish compared to when one speaks colloquially. The semi-structured interviews I led definitely used colloquial language, which made analysis difficult. Indeed, some analysis that students undertook of the online modality comes across as convoluted. For instance, Mary told me that prerecorded lectures take more time to finish than a regular lecture would, because she was given the ability to go back in the recording to allow the instructor to repeat what they had just said. Yet, this same student also told me that she speeds up prerecorded lectures by up to three times their default speed. Later in this thesis, I will use confounding anecdotes like this one to iterate on perceptions of time.

Often, statements given to me required a lot of interpretation to provide clarity for analytical purposes. Here is one example: an instructor brought up that a student came to her office hours and told her: "I can't read for twenty minutes at a time." Of course, a university-level student literally reads words for well-over twenty minutes at a time. But these words might be split between a cell phone, a textbook, emails, social media and discussion posts on Avenue to Learn. This student's phrase should therefore be interpreted to mean that they cannot *focus* on one individual, complex text for twenty minutes at a time, demonstrating that concentration and reading can be somewhat distinct. The action of reading is not merely seeing words, so it cannot be treated like a task which always takes a certain number of minutes to accomplish. One student may be able to read so many pages over twenty minutes while another student will read fewer pages but have a thorough understanding of these pages. And one might read all the pages over the course of many hours and still be totally clueless. Additionally, the kind of reading that the quoted student is referring to is academic reading, not just newspaper op-ed trivialities. Usefully, the writer Sven Birkerts (1994) differentiates reading comprehension between horizontal and vertical reading (76). Reading horizontally provides a flattened understanding of a text, such as getting the gist of things, whereas reading vertically elevates quality over quantity, suggesting that the text at hand can be understood by varying degrees. Verticality requires heightened concentration as it literally means reading up-and-down; re-reading sentences, pausing in order to digest ideas, and uses the basic assumption that the text has depth to it. To make sense of them, academic articles must be read vertically, and I think that it is fair to interpret *this* as the kind of reading which this student struggles with, even if their original statement does not consider such differences in levels of interpretation. Reading scholarly texts must involve intellectual effort and creative interpretation; reading these texts passively as simply absorbing

information that is gone after a few minutes makes analysis shallow. Furthermore, if it is possible to read things horizontally, it is not really thought-provoking, thus should not be included in course materials. After all, universities take pride in referring to themselves as 'higher education' institutions that are interested in learning as close to the totality of a subject rather than an education based on regurgitating summaries read on SparkNotes.com.

Another example of the practice of taking the things students say seriously, but not literally, happens when they speak emotively. Many students found it useful to highlight their feelings about school, such as: "I love this course," "I hate this course," or "online school feels like more work." A nit-picker might disregard the analytical value of the last of these three statements because the student has not clarified whether they are certain if online school has more-or-less work than in-person school does, or what if loving or hating a course has any implications for developing skills. Instead, I interpret that these students are just expressing that the tasks required for school are tied together with emotional states. It can take just one sitting to write an excellent, A+ essay on a topic that you are passionate about, but it can take multiple weeks to slog through writing an extremely dull essay that you feel disinterested in. Therefore, the student might be aware that you have roughly the same absolute quantity of work in online classes as you do in-person ones, but for her, homework administered online requires more work and effort to complete.

Furthermore, this thesis topic is relevant to promote scholarship on the subject of education because it has been understudied in anthropology. According to Susan Blum (2019), since the discipline of anthropology has historically studied things deemed unfamiliar to it, there is relatively less research on the topic of education, since career academics are very familiar with this industry (644). Academic anthropologists have been going to school for their whole lives, so

those who chose to study education are somewhat of a rarity. Prominently, only 12 out of 528 book reviews published in the journal *American Anthropologist* focused on learning, education or schools (643). Blum's line of argument is convincing because other social sciences do not share this disinterestedness in learning. Economics importantly studies the return on investment that levels of education afford, psychologists optimize learning habits, while sociologists have long recognized how educational institutions reflect society more broadly (646). Regardless of its historical lack of attention, ethnographic studies of learning and the culture at school provide anthropological depth and richness. I agree that there is a lack of anthropological projects focused on school, and therefore I hope to contribute to expanding the anthropology of learning, education, and schools, as it is just as rich as any other topic.

The initial impression I had of a dichotomy of online-loving and online-hating students was found to be overblown. Instead, after I finished my interviews, it was obvious that university students have diverse opinions about everything. It is important to highlight this, because demographic studies can essentialize students as being a homogenous body who fit neatly into tropes and categories. Statistical figures lump people together, such as the measurements which show that literacy and math scores have recently declined in the United States (NAEP 2023). These figures demonstrate that something has gone very wrong, but without a clear cause as to why. In the moral panic associated with the issue of declining achievement, it is easy to equate the average with everybody—*students* are worse. Many of the theorists in the forthcoming literature review, regardless of their differences, are alike in that they publish books and journal articles that advance an essentialist narrative that encompasses students as being most like one thing: distracted, inattentive, depressed, bored, anxious or otherwise, based on the influence that the Internet and digital technology has had on them. Maybe because these discussions centre

themselves around interaction with computers, expression becomes diluted into ones and zeros: students either are or aren't these things. As Jodi Dean (2003) argues, communication on the Internet is "reformatted in terms of market and spectacle as if the valuation itself had been rewritten in binary code" (102). It is appropriate for this literature to break out from these ideas, because the rest of the world which the binary world of computers seeks to recreate is full of complexity that is extensively studied before theorists jump to conclusions like I had when I started this research. The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) makes this clear in this chapter's epigraph: social scientists can fall victim to essentialist fallacies as they seek to classify things. Social science theory should instead recognize that "the facts of existence are a chaotic jumble" (164). I hope that by highlighting student experiences, this project will stray from simplistic notions which essentialize a student body to acknowledge the complexity pertaining to this issue.

CHAPTER 3: Literature Review

"I can't read for twenty minutes at a time … I don't have the capacity to study."

- Student attestation during office hours with an instructor

As I mentioned in the introduction, I doubt that anyone reading this has not seen commentary that covers the decline in the ability of students to accomplish their scholarly tasks, in part due to how computers are integrated in their lives. In this chapter, I provide pertinent concrete examples of select literature which theorizes on the nature of digital distraction as a social problem, and I highlight various commentaries about what is to be done. Though some authors may have diametrically opposed arguments, I explain that nearly all of the arguments that I overview in this chapter share the idea that digital technology has caused societal transformation as these authors work through the tropes from the discourse of distraction.

Although the ethnographic component to this project is mostly interested in the experiences associated with the move to online school, this chapter concerns itself with public commentary on computer technologies to establish a cultural association between computer technology and individuals being distracted from schoolwork.

Discourse of Distraction

"Is this the end of reading?" asks Beth McMurtrie in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article (May 9th, 2024). This title is gripping, though, exaggerated. She argues that we are not experiencing the end of reading altogether, but society *might* be witnessing the beginning of the end of reading intellectual literature. McMurtrie provides *The Chronicle's* readers with comments that various professors around America have made on the nature of this phenomenon. The first attestation in the essay is from Theresa MacPhail, a professor at Stevens Institute of

Technology. MacPhail tells the author that she has recently been perceiving a trend among her students, which has been decidedly negative: "... the number of students who complete their reading assignments has steadily declined." Because of this, "she began assigning fewer readings, then fewer still." But even with a reduced workload "most students still weren't doing the reading. And when they were, more and more struggled to understand it. Some simply gave up. Their distraction levels went 'through the roof.'" The rest of McMurtrie's article focuses on the question of *why* distraction levels suddenly elevated, which is represented by English professor Troy E. Spier's anecdote: "[Students] used to tell stories of parents reading to them at night … Now those narratives describe how students read posts on Twitter or Instagram or comments on TikTok." According to this perspective, the new generation of students are spending their free time reading bite-sized texts on social media, the quality of which pales in comparison to 'real' books. Some professors have reduced the amount of coursework in their syllabi to compensate for this unpreparedness, but others have gone down a different path.

Writing as an instructor of Computer Sciences, Professor Brian Ladd (2006) notes that many of his students enrolled themselves in the computing program because of their interest in computer games from the time they were young (163). According to Ladd, this "Nintendo generation" is "bored" by traditional school assignments, so it is now difficult to get these young adults to "buy in" to working without computers (164). These ones *need* computers. The subtitle of Ladd's paper is "Holding the Attention of Students Weaned on Computer Games". In other words, the introduction of the computer has had dramatic consequences which makes students less attentive to their schoolwork as they become seduced by the mystical digital world. This narrative argues that the world has changed, and schools must accommodate these changes or else sink into irrelevance while being responsible for a woefully undereducated student body. In

order to "engage" (165) these students who are perceived to have a lesser attention span compared to their parents' generation, students in Ladd's course code a text-based version of a video game using C++, a coding language. Instead of reducing the course load, this approach attempts to modify the syllabus by playing to the crowd. Accordingly, the first iteration of the game assignment was a success, as Ladd attests that student effort and student engagement improved compared to previous cohorts of students who wrote more traditional coding assignments.

As of 2021, gaming is no longer a common activity for only computer sciences students. In fact, forty-two per cent of Ontario high school students report playing video games every day (Boak, Elton-Marshall and Hayley 2021). The social sciences boast a strong literature on games, ranging from Erving Goffman (1983) to Roger Caillois, with Caillois (1958) arguing that the content within games reveals secrets about the makeup of societies. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz agreed and claimed that games such as the Balinese Cockfight "rehearse the collective dramas of life", (Schüll 2012, 11) packaging up important things into little symbolic gestures which represent a society to itself as an object of reflection.

From 2020 onward, peaks of COVID-19 required learning institutions to move to online spaces. Around this time, I remember virtually tutoring an elementary school student who would sporadically interrupt our Zoom calls with the click-clack of his keyboard—I later found out that this student was playing a game called *Grand Theft Auto* while ostensibly practicing grammatical predicates with me. The game playing was persistent, stretching across weeks of tutoring. The kid was discreet about his play, and I only learned about it once his mother went in his room and let loose on him. Though other social scientists may have concerned themselves with the aesthetics of violence present in the game, or how it distributes chance, competition, and how

these things contribute to the identity of Canadian adolescents, I am instead most interested in the fact that this student was in two places at once: learning, but also playing. He was distracted. Throughout the rest of my undergraduate degree which largely took place online, I kept this illustration in mind, and it continues to colour my imagination when I wonder what is happening on the other end of the blank screen on a Zoom call.

There is a breadth of contemporary research on the imbrication of students and digital technology that reproduce the image of young people spending countless hours on their computers, particularly during the worst years for COVID-19 in Ontario. Addiction to Internet Gaming is now mentioned in the DSM-5 as being a topic for further study (Luo et al. 2021), possibly because of its similarities to Gambling Disorder which has long been established as an addictive pathology. Contemporary research on addiction can use more liberal definitional criteria for addiction as some researchers look beyond physiological responses induced by chemicals, instead highlighting that certain activities produce neurological responses similar to those induced by drugs (Schüll 2012). For example, the latest edition of Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's important *Well-Being of Ontario Students Report* (Boak, Elton-Marshall and Hayley 2021) no longer concerns itself only with drug addiction; it has expanded its criteria and now recognizes problematic usage of electronic devices. This report notes that twenty-four per cent of Ontario high school students reported playing video games for *five hours or more every day*; fifty-two per cent record more than five hours of electronic device use every day; thirty-one per cent record more than five hours every day on social media, among other computerized trends in youth activities. Other research has noted a correlation between screen time and depressive symptoms (Twenge 2017), though this has been contested elsewhere. Regardless of whether the rapid consumption of digital technology is truly addictive or has a

causal relationship with depression, it is critical to note that scientific reports are now accounting the large amount of time spent on electronic devices under the same subheading which indices illicit opioid consumption among teenagers.

All these markers of electronic device usage among Ontario's students rose considerably from 2019 to 2021, coinciding with the changes to their schooling environment (Boak, Elton-Marshall and Hayley 2021). In between these years, Ontario high school students shifted from primarily in-person learning to a sort of betwixt-and-between state of online learning then rapidly returned to in-person, as rises and falls in the levels of coronavirus in a region necessitated students to remain at home or go back to the classroom on a whim. Due to the rapid change in the social environment of schools, it is difficult for researchers to provide up-to-date analysis of digital integration. Brian Ladd's paper from 2006 now seems antiquated, wholly unable to grasp the extent of how much time people were spending looking at screens during COVID-19 or the conversations that ensue from it.

Techno Optimism and Pessimism

The discourse which connects distraction as a consequence of the use of digital technology tends to follow one of two approaches: techno-optimism or techno-pessimism. In this subsection, I highlight particular passages from texts which represent each, though they are not chosen for their circulation or popularity, but for their precision in expressing each idea.

The first example is a passage in *Capitalist Realism* (2011) by Mark Fisher, which represents techno-pessimism. His idea is that a contemporary strain of nihilism is the result of human interaction with a certain set of technologies—but not just digital ones, indulgent ones—but nonetheless ones that just happen to be more-often-than-not of the digital variety. He writes that students are pathologically bored in school because real life outside the classroom has

reached a point where it is utterly overstimulating, and digital technologies play a large part of this (23). “The communicative sensation-stimulus matrix of texting, YouTube and fast food … makes reading real books [Fisher offers Friedrich Nietzsche’s writing as an example], impossible” (24). Furthermore, “to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand…the soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion of PlayStation, all-night TV and marijuana” (22) is just unactionable for the modern-day student. Fisher reports that he himself was schooled in the old system of “carceral discipline” (Foucault 1975) where bodies are made to be attentive and rigid to demonstrate focus to oneself and others around them. After a rapid change in the manifestation of embodiment in classrooms, he became surprised that students in his class acted without the same discipline that he was used to growing up. This new type of student studies in a “post-disciplinary framework:” eating, talking, and slumping over in their desks (Fisher 2011, 23). Indeed, a student I interviewed for this project even suggested that the best place for her to work was from her bed!

Fisher (2011) then singles out one student in his class and asks him why he is always wearing headphones during seminars. “He replied that it didn't matter, because he wasn't actually playing any music.” (24) Upon reflection it seems as though this student was lying so that he would not get in trouble. However, being an academic, Fisher theorizes from this conversation that the technology of the headphone attached to one’s body comforted the student, as “the presence of the phones on the ears … was a reassurance that the [communicative sensation-stimulus] matrix was *still there,* within reach.” (24) As I read this passage in my shared office for graduate students, the other occupants (exemplary, A+ Master’s students) are utilizing such with digital technologies at school by working with headphones in their ears, lulled by brown noise and Spotify playlists.

The other school of thought in this discourse is the techno-optimist approach which is perhaps best represented by the book *Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn* (2010). The authors, Larry Rosen, Mark Carrier and Nancy Cheever, all academic psychologists, develop a theory that argues that human interaction with technology has forever changed the outcome of human action, but with quite the opposite conclusion which Fisher theorized. Instead of noting that students cannot 'do' school, these researchers argue that this "new generation" of tech-savvy teens *hate* school because "education has not caught up" with effectively utilizing multimedia and multitasking in the way that entertainment medias have (Rosen, Carrier & Cheever 2010, 3). It is therefore time to adapt. The authors argue that schools must catch up to the multimedia sensation-stimulus matrix and expand the non-boring digital network into educational spaces. Based on their qualitative interviews with students, parents, and teachers, they assert that critical stakeholders involved in education agree with this sentiment, and these stakeholders want even more technology in the classroom: 6/10 parents of preteens as of 2010 indeed hoped for "significant investment" in technologizing schools for educational purposes (4). Accordingly, it is imagined that these children possess "amazing high-tech knowledge" (5) which has thusly been repressed by the paucity of funding; there aren't enough computers per capita.

Each approach, whether optimist or pessimist, does not let go of the issue of mechanically-induced distractedness even if they propose quite different solutions to the problem at hand. Both argue that students get very distracted when they do not have screens to interact with. This causes disruptions of homework, studying, and class time, but the authors of *Rewired* claim that it is a systemic failure in that educators are not keeping up with the new digital world. Essentially, the rest of the world has moved on while schools have not, but it is about time that

schools catch up to the rest of the world. Rosen et al. (2010) propose gamifying and technologizing schools to fully engage their students. They write about an already-existing computer program called “Study Island” as an example of a good way to fully engage students' learning potential (7). The program places students inside of a virtual reality, which they have deemed engaging because it has digital graphics and gamified elements (emerging out of behaviourist psychology, some theorists argue that a rewards system which allows kids to play games as homework questions are answered correctly will instil learning as a habit once there is a consistent reward). One adolescent student interviewed by the authors tells them that “he could not wait” (8) to play and learn online at Study Island, which is meant to provide contrast with an archetypical student who despises normal homework. Another example the authors provide, this time hypothetical, is a colourful three-dimensional virtual world with a customizable player-character roaming around a world in which a “Fractions Building” is situated, a digital ‘place’ where the student-gamer can practice problems such as “what is one half multiplied by one quarter?” Upon answering correctly, the student-gamer will receive currency (“classroom cash”) which may later be exchanged for digital accessories or possibly extra play-time at home, creating a market in order to reward learning. A system of external motivation clearly link these two examples, though the authors argue that for technology to be effective in the classroom, it must “reinvigorate learning” and “it is not simply a matter of making students less bored” (16). They further illustrate that the new writing modalities offered by digital spaces have the ability to enhance creativity: “replace a paper and pencil with a laptop and online discussion board and you may find that even the most reserved students are strong writing contributors. It is not the student. *It is the tool”* [emphasis added] (43). This solution well-articulates the techno-optimist position in the student-as-inattentive discourse. Yet, this integration of technologies is still

coming from a perspective that the technology is useful because it suppresses boredom by transforming unfun tasks into fun ones by providing a market whereby external rewards can be attained upon success. So it is precisely the ability of the technology to facilitate operant conditioning which makes it so useful for teaching.

The way that digital technology is written about in *Rewired* seems out-of-place in contemporary literature on the topic. Indeed, Rosen now publishes articles explaining the addictive properties of task-switching and unlimited scrolling that social media companies take advantage of in *Psychology Today*. Yet the writing in his 2010 book treats digital technology with a certain aura which suggests that digital learning has endless possibilities. It is full of anecdotes that show parents amazed at what their kids can learn in a very short time, seemingly implying that more time spent with computing devices will make children digitally-literate and therefore able to solve highly technical problems, a sort of educational learning curve that equates all things digital, no matter how complex, as being equal. Indeed, media from the era of the infancy of computers often represents characters who spend a lot of time with computers as misunderstood technical geniuses who excel at highly complicated tasks so long as there is a computer involved. What ended up happening instead of this rapid learning was that children's mastering of video games like *Club Penguin* (Rosen, Carrier & Cheever 2010, 21) and simple photo editing software did not translate into aptitude in C++ coding or other complex computer skills as *Rewired* seems to imply. It is now safe to say that the "remarkable technological strengths" (17) of this generation was exaggerated.

At the other end of representation, Fisher's (2011) concept of *depressive hedonia*, his technical term for the inability to do things which are not fun, expands clinical depression to its inverse as a uniquely twenty-first century problem. From a medical perspective, depression is a

lack of feeling pleasure ("anhedonia") from doing things that would typically be pleasurable for people, yet Fisher believes that his college students displaying symptoms of depression are today better characterized by "an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure" (22). Accordingly, Rosen et al. (2010) describe a young student who is literally bored to tears by the existence of pencil and paper homework, as the homework is not entertaining or fun. Instead of flipping depression on its head, Rosen et al. highlight this behaviour as a contemporary inability to "unitask" (33). For the younger generations who have been raised on a "constant media diet" (25), multitasking is purported to be their norm. Underscoring multitasking as legitimate allows the authors to claim that the "preteens, teens, and young adults" of this generation spend "upwards of 20 hours a day … consuming media" (13). As there are only 24 hours in a day, this amazing statistic is made possible by arguing that time is dictated by media consumption, i.e., listening to a one-hour podcast while watching a one hour of television is equivalent to consuming two hours of 'content' while only spending one. In other words, the new generation is fed up with boredom and moving slowly through life at an analog pace as they recognize that time can be better spent multitasking. For education to be relevant in the 21st century it must do away with unitasking and provide a sufficient number of activities to provide adequate stimulation for its students. Regardless of either theoretical underpinning, it is largely accepted among stakeholders in educational spaces that contemporary students are thinking about more than just the lecture in front of them.

One of the first students I interviewed told me that her favourite class was McMaster's *Intro to Psychology* class. She told me that it was her favourite because it used unusual pedagogical techniques that were exciting to her. Naturally, I was interested, so I went to a lecture and occupied an empty seat at the back. The topic of the lecture just so happened to be

covering the psychology of multitasking (though to my surprise there was no mention of depressive hedonia or unitasking). As the instructor started the lecture discussing a concept called “the paradox of attention”, the student sitting in front of me started streaming a soccer game on his laptop. As I was there primarily to collect data for my thesis project, I began to multitask, with my attention split between the lecture and observing the task-switching student in front of me. Four minutes after the soccer stream, the student was checking a personal email account, then playing a game involving gambling, and then a car racing game. I noted that he played at least five different games during the lecture—distraction was right in front of me, at the most ironic time.

Beyond what the content of the lecture could promise, I was presented with the embodiment of the discussion which claims that contemporary students just cannot focus on one thing at a time. Fisher (2011) asserts that student behaviours like this one signal a shift from the “old disciplinary” system which Foucault (1975) described, to a new Deleuzian form of society based on control (Fisher 2011, 22, 26). For Foucault, the old disciplinary system replicated the image of the factory, whereas Deleuze (1992) argued that “the corporation has replaced the factory” (4). One distinct difference between the model of the corporation and that of the factory, according to Deleuze, is that while the factory is a capitalism of production, the structure of the corporation is capitalism for the sale of the product (6). For corporations, so long as the final product is sufficient, things like ergonomic posture (“slumping”) do not matter. But for factories, where work is squeezed out of embodied efficiencies, ergonomics may be more or less productive as so obviously demonstrated by Frederick Taylor. This is the basic difference between enclosure societies and control societies, activity or things are encased by “molds” in the former but are “modulated” in the latter (4). In schools, this transformation towards control

gives way to students taking class in the comforts of their bed; otherwise eating, talking, and slumping over in their chairs so long as the assignment gets finished.

As such, in the old enclosure societies, school was finished when exams were, like how factory shifts were finished after eight hours. Now, however, graduation is "limitlessly postponed" and instead of moving on to the next thing after the completion of another ("from school to the barracks to the factory"), these entities coexist with each other (Deleuze 1992, 5) as the liminal status of student becomes elongated in the corporate model as he refers to schools as "*perpetual training*" centres. The Internet theorist Sherry Turkle illustrates: "the Internet changes popular understandings of identity … We are encouraged to think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicious, flexible, *and ever in process*" [emphasis added](1995, 263-264). So, with the rise of the Internet, everything is in perpetual motion and space is no longer enclosed. Identities are even ostensibly no longer confined to the expanses of the body. The emergent processes of perpetuality and borderless space go hand-in-hand with Deleuze's control society. Indeed, as society has adopted a more flexible model of capitalism, so too have the means to flexibly develop identity by the expansion of the Internet. Changes to schools are in-line with such a socio-economic-identity transformation. Many of the students I interviewed jump between university Major to Minor to professional certificate and then back again, exemplifying the liminal status of the student, making graduation less of a 'reincorporation' back into society as it used to be in the past. Some students I interviewed talked about their passions for new areas of study, while others spoke of certifications for future employment opportunities. The phrase "lifelong learning" in a literal sense best exemplifies Deleuze's argument: learning is never finished (cf. Elfert 2015). As school enrolments continue to expand, graduation is less and less permanent. From 1900 to 2000, the student body around the world grew *two-hundredfold*

from 500,000 to 100,000,000, equalling 1 per cent of the relevant population to 20 per cent (Blum 2016, 94). More people are in school for more lengthy stays.

School's transformation towards the corporation started with only a whisper when Deleuze wrote about it in the early 1990s. Henry Giroux (2014:Chapter 4) illustrates the extent to which schools have changed over time: "campuses have come to look like shopping malls." As schools are often primarily public institutions (Blum 2016, 98) they are some of the first sectors of society impacted by public policy, which has increasingly emphasized corporate rationalities through neoliberal policy. Neoliberalism is a school of political thought which seeks to reform markets and expand them into public and personal spaces to commodify things that were previously not thought of as commodities. Neoliberal ideology posits that market mechanisms will deliver services to citizens more efficiently than public institutions would, thus neoliberal governments aim to privatize select state-owned assets (Shore & Wright 2015, 561). In post-secondary schools, a prime target for privatization, this realizes itself as an exaggerated profit motive while limiting government funding so that higher education institutions become reliant on private donations, money gathered from sponsors, tuition, and corporations. This is in contrast to the Fordist so-called 'golden age' of capitalism where the lion's share of funding was gathered from the government. For example, in Canada the public funding for universities in 1982 amounted to a whopping 82.7% of the operating revenue which later diminished to 54.9% in 2012 (Harden 2017, 3). Furthermore, throughout the 1990s, Canadian undergraduate tuition costs doubled to make up for the public funding deficit (StatsCan 2001). Because of this change in the funding structure of the institution, the continuation of higher education relies on appeasing student desires. Because students are paying more, they might feel entitled to a customizable, adaptable, and flexible educational experience compared with the older cohort of students (and

as we will see in the next chapter, higher grades). So, if students desire their education to be tailored to their own liking, there is an increased incentive for institutions to achieve this. Implementing digital technology in the classroom is certainly the 'optimistic' way to appease those students who are bored to tears by homework.

Distraction and Cell Phones

Since the former theorists are interested in the quality of distraction, it is imperative to precisely note what exactly this means. To be distracted, according to its Latin etymology, is to be torn apart [dis-traction] (Lang 2020) by multiple things, much like the young student playing video games while also learning his grammar. Its usage as a verb is precise, as it notes that an individual must be participating in two or more activities to meet the criteria of distraction, rather than using it as an adjective. Furthermore, each task is usually associated with a good or bad virtue, such as being either: important and trivial; educational and entertaining; calm and frenetic. The former virtues can be applied to many specific tasks done in schools, while the latter fit the realm of entertainment. Reading, writing, or sitting in on lecture are important, educational, and calm. On the other hand, cell phones more so than any other digital object have come to represent the exact opposite of these positive virtues. Especially in classrooms, students are criticized by the public for misusing their cell phones while in class to text, call, photograph, watch, record, scroll, and more. For example, report cards in Hamilton's public school system will soon comment on a student's 'distraction level' based on their cell phone usage in the classroom (McCullough July 8th, 2024). At this point, one can note that the object of the cell phone is discursively imbricated not only with distraction, but the morally-lesser virtues listed above. Surely, part of the unattractiveness of the cell phone must be that all of this happens on a little screen only visible to the user, so that an observer can only imagine some combination of

all of these things going on at once, imagining the tech as the nexus of distraction and anti-social behaviour.

In recent years, the cell phone has been the subject of much criticism in public discourse. One popular series of articles concerns the problematic usage of cell phones: In the magazine *The Atlantic*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2023) titles one of his articles: "Get Phones Out of Schools Now: They impede learning, stunt relationships, and lessen belonging. They should be banned [from schools]." Additionally, his book *The Anxious Generation* which chronicles the demise of the cell phone generation's mental health, has been sitting in the *New York Times's* best-sellers list in non-fiction for weeks. In a recent essay, he writes that cell phones are at least partly responsible for the "international epidemic of mental illness, which started in 2012." Specifically, the expansion of dangerous social media companies was facilitated by the increased processing power of the smartphone compared to the flip phone: "[the early 2010's] were the years when adolescents in rich countries traded in their flip phones for smartphones and moved much more of their social lives online" (2024).

Yet when smartphones were a brand-new technology, Haidt (2024) had an optimistic outlook on the devices, writing that that he thought he "could see [his two-year old son's] neurons being woven together faster as a result of the stimulation [the iPhone] brought to his brain." This sparked his belief that humanity was undergoing a great evolution: "I thought I could see his [the two-year old's] future job prospects improving." Note that this perspective is firmly techno-optimistic. But times have changed: based on Haidt's expert knowledge as a psychologist, he now acknowledges how wrongheaded this opinion was. He explains that the human's frontal cortex is developing until the age of 25, and this region of the brain is important to help "maintain focus" (Haidt 2023) on one topic. The brain's neurons which were once

imagined to be woven together faster are now imagined to be inadequately woven together as a result of excess speed. Adolescents are therefore in a state of vulnerability to devices that encourage task-switching, as it makes them more challenging from a neurological point of view to focus their attention on one complicated task. For centuries, attention to one task has, of course, been the basis of education.

Accordingly, Haidt's informants—teachers, school administrators—"all hate phones" because of the negative effect they have on student concentration, which threatens the very institution of school altogether. In fact, the Toronto Public District School Board is in the process of suing large social media companies including Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat for facilitating an "attention, learning, and mental health crisis" in their schools (Vanessa Balintec 2024, March 28th, CBC News). Quantitative data suggest that students who use phones during classes get lower grades than their phone-free peers, which helps to explain the ire of educators toward this device (Haidt 2023). Similar sentiments make the rounds through popular media and newspapers, especially since early COVID outbreaks, and particularly enabled since the U.S. Surgeon General offered an advisory stating that "we do not yet have enough evidence to determine if social media use is sufficiently safe for [adolescents]" in mid-2023.

Though Haidt's work has been met positively by the general public, it has also been contested by psychologists including Candice L. Odgers, a researcher studying adolescent mental health. She argues in *Nature's* book review section that Haidt's newest book's central argument relies on a simple causal inference fallacy as he suggests that cell phone use causes mental health issues such as depression. Odgers (2024) counters that "findings from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development study … has found no evidence of drastic changes associated with digital-technology use" (29). She argues that focusing on cell phones as being solely responsible

for this generation's "sadness and pain" (29) problematically ignores contemporary issues that have already been established as "leading contributors" to an increased "suicide rate" (the author's proof of sadness and pain) in the field, namely "access to guns, exposure to violence, structural discrimination and racism, sexism and sexual abuse, the opioid epidemic, economic hardship and social isolation" (29). Accordingly, these explanations are "evidence-based" and rooted in "science" (30). Other academics such as Miller et al. (2023) note that when looking at adolescents, there is "no significant impact of digital screen media activity on neural maturation over a two-year period". Psychologists Vuorre and Przybylski (2024) found that there are "positive and statistically significant associations between internet connectivity and well-being" (1), including adopting social media profiles such as Facebook. Indeed, 84.9% of the 2.4 million people polled in Vuorre and Przybylski had significant positive associations between their well-being as measured by things like life satisfaction and positive experiences once access to the Internet was introduced (6). Finally, a "scoping review" that is pending publication found that cell phone bans in elementary schools around the world have little influence when it comes to better academic achievement and mental health: studies found either slight improvements in these factors, no difference, or "more harm to students' mental health and wellbeing when they were subjected to phone bans" (Campbell and Edwards 2024). With many psychologists effectively denouncing Haidt's claims then, why does the idea that cell phones or other devices that access the Internet are to blame for generational anxieties resonate so much with the book-reading public? Regardless of any research to the contrary, it is obvious to anyone that many of the tasks completed on cell phones are of a lesser importance in the grand scheme of learning compared with the real-world activities done in school. Largely, cell phones are for entertainment purposes only. When cell phones are denounced, it is almost an affirmation that

those who do not use them are completing challenging tasks which are equated with morally good behaviour.

Literature professor James Lang (2020) offers a different perspective from the cause-and-effect cell phone determinism argument stated above. Instead, he argues that student attention must be "cultivated" (Chapter 2). In the era of cell phones, standalone course content is now insufficient because students may now access an entertaining social world at all times. So, for a course to be worthy of attention, it must exist in relation to a student's social world, not outside it. In the introduction to chapter five of his book *Distracted* (2020), he rhetorically explains the history of British literature in a matter-of-fact way that he intends to be boring to the lay reader by emphasizing literary periods which are assumed to be totally irrelevant to the social worlds of the students that he teaches. Then, he goes over the course syllabus, which is imagined to be even more boring than literary periods. After this exercise, Lang notes that it should be expected by the literature professor that his students will eventually browse their cell phones for something they deem more interesting than the overview of canonical English authors from the 19th century. After all, the cell phone contains access to friends and other fun things. After his intentionally boring class introduction routine, Lang writes: "have I convinced you that reading British literature will improve your life, or enrich your understanding of the world, or even provide you with any enjoyment?" (Chapter 5) In other words, for a course to hold the attention of a student it must be attractive from the get-go, and to do this, the course must advertise that it has the potential to do personal good through the project of self-improvement, reiterating that doing well in school is associated with moral goodness. More importantly, a course must also limit discussing things that are inherently boring, like a syllabus, otherwise, the digital distraction will kick in.

This exercise, however, places the onus of deciding what is interesting and good on the instructor, while the student is perceived to exist in a perpetual state of distraction by Lang as he emphasizes that students will return to a default state of focusing on tasks facilitated by cell phones. However, what seems to be lost in Lang's rhetorical thought experiment is that at one time he too was also a student who remained curious despite how boring reading the syllabus is. Of course he did not have a phone, but prior to its invention, the syllabus was still boring, and it will continue to be so; anyone can admit this. Despite it being so boring, Lang and others like him pushed past this and found enjoyment from the topic of historical British literature. Indeed, many of the students I spoke with admitted that they have esoteric academic interests that must seem boring to anybody else. Lang's highlighting of the technology of the cell phone is revealing, as this seems to demonstrate that once students have access to this particular device, their motives for seeking education change in that they are now unable to seek intrinsic motivation for learning. Thus, they must rely purely on extrinsic motivation, that of gamified virtual realities, though Ruth Grant (2011) astutely notes that reliance on extrinsic reward brings out "mercenary qualities" in people's moral character (112-113). Thus, the language with which cell phones are discussed reveals underlying assumptions about 'human nature' and motivation. Lang's argument is also to imply that students enrol in a course on British literature as a form of entertainment the same way that a television program is entertaining, suggesting that students have no sense of long-term future reward, and no reason to do boring-but-good things. The syllabus is essential for learning at a university level, and students who want to succeed can read through it, boring as it is. Many of my student-informants expressed a sentiment similar to this one, telling me that "yes, [school] is challenging, but I like it. Things distract me, but I can manage them."

Positionality of Critique, and Publicness

Based on the testimonies of these educators, they are involved in criticizing the ability of their students and how they spend their time. On a basic level, this is obviously a large part of their job. Teachers also provide rewards when things are done well, but critique is part and parcel of teaching, evident from excerpts in this chapter. Though this critique may be harsh, teachers are situated in a role where criticism can be useful; all work can be improved upon. However, this orientation seems to often extend beyond the utilitarian aspect of marking papers into general academic theory. Teachers also socialize with other teachers and share their thoughts and concerns with their peers. For instance, I found a kind of social solidarity with other teaching assistants when we would denounce the childish prose and problematic logic of first year undergraduate students who seemed aghast at the idea of including page numbers in their citations.

This sort of moralizing-as-academic and criticism-as-socialization I think should be expected to a degree to differentiate students from instructors, as a social process that anthropologists have referred to as "schismogensis" (Graeber & Wengrow 2021, 56). Teachers deserve to maintain difference from their students, and socialize, and even complain! But applying criticism which was intended to be nothing more than small talk in an analytical sense may be problematic. Such conversations are not serious the way that a sociological experiment may be, though, when small talk is treated as analytical, it can harmfully essentialize subjects. Susan Blum (2016) sums up the trope of the teacher's criticism well when she writes that instructors at her school complains along the lines of: "students are lazy … they don't know how to write properly. They misuse so many words. … They don't care." (30) The existence of these sentiments among teachers is as meaningful as they are harsh, and they have existed well before

computers. Blum's essentialist representation of the university lifestyle continues students binge-watch television, binge drink alcohol, engage in "demeaning sexual hook ups," (56) distract themselves in class by going on Facebook, and of course, browse their cell phones for hours on end. Especially since March 2020, criticisms like these are more visible as teachers ramped up complaints to each other about the Internet, cell phones, laptop computers, and all other digital technologies which facilitated virtual teaching.

Taking these criticisms at face value invokes a sense of moralism, using this kind of discourse to enforce cultural rules of pollution. This chapter thus far has identified prominent scholars from various fields who may hold opposing viewpoints with each other in terms of what the problems are and how we should deal with them, but they are also in agreement over the idea that the student body is changing due to its interaction with computers. These changes cause scholars to produce a moral panic over the pedagogical practices that are deemed insufficient for quality education. The debate is framed by establishing the archetype of a student, who is torn between two things: good learning and bad distraction. The latter is associated with the kind of societal pollution that Mary Douglas (1966) wrote about in *Purity and Danger*. According to her, pollution is attached to individuals who subvert respect for social conventions as well as hygiene (7). Pollution is "matter out of place" (36), so its existence necessitates that things in place are important: ordered relations makes for good people, or in schools, learners. For example, when one criticizes the figure of the student as distracted, there also exists an inverse idea of a student that deserves praise. The trope of the elite, put-together student whose eyes never wander comes to mind (of course, this student has very clean clothes as well, but that is beside the point). Accordingly, if inattentive students are indeed polluted, then it is not just an issue of inferior education, but a moral issue. "Pollution rules are used to marshal moral disapprovement when it

lags" (130). And moral disapprovement is everywhere, because schools are imbued with ideas of moral goodness. Douglas puts forward the concept of "institutionalized jealousy" (112) which she uses to discuss polluted people. She writes that in 'primitive societies', the dissidents—those who openly display unhappiness with society—find themselves accused of witchcraft only after they express feelings of rebellion which functions as a warning to fit into society more broadly. This denunciation functions to solidify social cohesion as well as cultural togetherness by weeding out the would-be troublemakers. The inattentive student is seemingly in the same position, as they are accused of witchcraft in an abstract sense because bored students do not appear to want to participate in school. Thus, school's social structure is kept in place by morally denouncing polluted bodies as they threaten social cohesion (116). Denouncing the bad deviants also provides a contrast against which a good student is imagined.

*

Josephine

> "Whatever time period you are in has things to distract you … there are always things to divide your attention between. But phones are most visible now."

There are, of course, dissident arguments which suggest that there is no issue with technology in the classroom. Blum (2016) suggests that communication is always in a perpetual state of evolution, evidenced by the fact that we as a species no longer are reading utilitarian texts like how Sumerians only read tablets which accounted debts for bushels of wheat and such (46); we can now also read for pleasure. She argues that reading and communication is expansive to the point that people are now reading all the time, drawing upon an opinion piece in *USA Today* (2013) that suggests that online access to news and books democratizes accessibility to

these mediums, therefore increasing engagement with reading in a general sense (45). One of my informants agreed with this sentiment, telling me that our 21st century "access to information at all times creates an environment where people can always be attentive." Therefore, though Blum is a professor who admires classical English literature, she is not worried about the phenomenon of English teachers assigning graphic novels to their students in the sense that it will corrupt the literary canon (46). Accordingly, students have always been distracted by things even before cell phones and computers, like crosswords (Kissel & Blum 2022, 4). Allow me to repeat myself: the syllabus has always been boring.

Other scholars suggest that pinpointing new technological devices as the stimuli for deconcentration and distraction is essentially a historical given in that things have always distracted people as it is purportedly in our nature to switch tasks. James Lang (2020) offers the example of the coffee house as one of these hyper-distracting objects that divided attention. The first coffee houses came to England in 1650 and were designated as places where people could interact with one another *while also* being a space for working, which at the time was supposedly a break from places which were either only for working or only for leisure. He then cites two texts from the 17th century which express dismay towards the coffee house for its apparent role in declining "solid and serious learning" (Chapter 1). This statement has a familiar ring to it. In Lang's text, more things are offered as examples of historical scapegoats to inattentiveness, demonstrating that thinkers such as Augustine have at one point denounced the circus as distracting while others place blame on the radio, television, music, and more, and in spite of these distractions, humanity is still around, producing impressive knowledge. Though Lang brings forward these ideas, he finds it hard to take this argument seriously because when compared to digital distractions in the 21st century, the coffee house appears dull and calm. In

other words, just because "we have always been distracted" (Chapter 1) does not mean that our contemporary distraction is not also a cause for concern because things can be more or less distracting. One student I interviewed mentioned to me that "people are more attentive now than ever before, yet they are getting burnt out all the time" suggesting that the raw quantity of ideas leads to intellectual and emotional overload. Indeed, even if reading has been democratized by a myriad of websites and social medias does not mean that the quality of *USA Today* is comparable to difficult-to-read academic books.

But the example of the coffee house being cited as the Ur place of distraction is particularly ripe for analysis as it is interesting that it has also been the subject for another theory to represent a break in human communication altogether, according to Jürgen Habermas. Habermas understood the English coffee house as the catalyst for the "public sphere" which innovated how people interacted with each other and their ideas (Dreyfus 2008, 73). As a place for socialization but also a place for work, the multiple functions inherent to the coffee house tears apart people's attention. For this reason, the idea of the public sphere should be investigated in relation to distraction. Yet, according to Habermas, the coffee house was a good thing because it prompted dialogue in a place that breaks down existing hierarchies between people, so that public discussions would be based on reason and "the better argument could win" (Dean 2003, 96). This made communication in the coffee house more democratic than anything else at the time, especially elitist universities. Coffee houses open up "questioning and critique … as a commodity to be consumed" (Dean 2003, 96) which made open discussion, in principle, part and parcel of Enlightenment culture. Eventually, the locus of the public sphere changed from coffee houses to the daily press, which "encouraged everyone to develop an opinion about everything" (Dreyfus 2008, 75). Hubert Dreyfus extends that as the medium of the public sphere continues to

change, arguing that the Internet is possibly the most democratized form of the public sphere to date, but it is also the most distracting form the public has communicated through (2008, 73-78). The Internet has mass communication on a near-global level whereas the Press and the coffee house could only expand communication outside of the university, workplace, and home. The Internet has extreme anonymity, democratizing communication on the one hand due to breaking down hierarchies compared with other forms of communication. Albeit, by extension, no "qualification" or "responsibility" is needed to communicate, either (77, 78). Though the Internet is vast—there are many websites for free thinkers premised on questioning and critique alone—Dreyfus notes that blogs happen to fulfil Habermas's definition perfectly. You read or write a blog to share or consume information freely, with minimal hierarchy, levelling differences like class and education (78). However, one critical difference between the in-person iterations of public spheres and the Internet is that anonymity, though it helps to level difference, also removes risk and responsibility (Hannay 2005, 128). It is critical to note that anthropologists have found risk to be necessary to *meaningful* social interaction: if a person is not willing to risk something and 'lose face', failures and successes are meaningless and there will be no social repercussions for a person who says stupid things on the Internet.

Alastair Hannay (2005) notes that without risk, one is an on-looker rather than an active member of the public (128). Furthermore, the Internet according to Jodi Dean (2003:98) is so detached from the public sphere that she instead terms it "an ideology of publicity in the service of communicative capitalism." Communicative capitalism is Dean's (2009) technical term for information-as-spectacle that "talks without responding" (22). The Internet makes one part of communication, sharing, highly accessible, which in turn actually limits the other part of communication, listening. Instead of being part of the public sphere, communicative capitalism

manifests itself as the enormity of opinions on the Internet, which are of course ignored by most people. Yet, those who communicate their personal opinions erroneously feel as though they are being heard. After all, when children first learn to communicate with others, they eventually come to understand that conversations are reciprocal. Talking is met with listening, unless you are talking to yourself which is utterly taboo in real-world context, and listening is necessary if you want to have someone listen to your ideas. Yet the boundaries of communicative capitalism take the phenomenon of listening for granted, and on the Internet there is usually no one listening, and even fewer of those listeners are paying any attention. For Dean, it is not just that the sheer volume of messages weakens the importance of each of them, but that they are quickly replaced in a 24/7 information cycle that sends constant messages which divide individual focus away from important topics: "... the speed, simultaneity, and interconnectivity of electronic telecommunications networks produce massive distortions and concentrations of wealth … the standards of a finance and consumption-driven entertainment culture set the very terms of democratic governance today" (Dean 2003, 102). In other words, financialization and the possibility for not just profits but super-profits on the Internet make it utterly non-public. Though her essay about the Net is from 2003, a time when social media did not really exist, her point about low-level conversation and super-profits is best exemplified by today's social media websites. Social media websites have their users interact with each other which is then monetized by selling sections of their webspace to advertisers. This makes the messages themselves the commodity, rather than the owners of the website producing a commodity to be bought. Communication like this does not properly constitute a public sphere as envisioned by Habermas (Dean 2003, 96; 2009, 27).

Regardless as to whether the Internet is or is not like a public sphere, the discussion and the disagreement about it highlights important questions for how university education situates itself online. Just as the coffee house supposedly hindered solid and serious learning in the minds of scholars from the time, the same is argued about the Internet and especially its relationship to the public. It must be underscored that the university is *not* a public sphere even if it is situated on the Internet. The university is exclusive, unequal, and inaccessible by its nature. But if a way of communication is argued to be part of the public, chances are that the public will also associate it being unfocused and distracting. So, contrasting norms associated with a particular form of communication is useful to think with, because the accessible standards happen to be denounced as distracting while the elitist norms are, well, elitist, but also *concentrated*. But that does not mean that these spheres are totally distinct from one another. Because the ideas associated with university and ideas associated with being online or in the realm of technology are antagonistic to each other, universities utilising Internet technologies will occupy a paradoxically liminal position: on the one hand, inaccessible, but also, that the online world is associated with expressing public opinion and facilitating the project of democracy.

Finally, it must be highlighted that the coffee house, the press, and the Internet have all been noted historically as spaces where distraction is rampant and associated more so with being 'polluted' than being clean. The university is the inverse; it has been associated with focus and attention, and we can envision a cleanly-robed student standing in front of an ivy-clad stone wall graduating with honours as the figure of a morally good young person. Associating norms and tropes with certain types of communication help us understand why the use of computing devices that access the Internet in university education is such a powerful discourse that runs through popular culture, governmental policy, and academic theory: The associations that are so strongly

linked with computers are antagonistic to the associations that we normally have for higher education insofar as communication is concerned.

Conclusion

The various scholars highlighted in this introductory chapter offer diagnoses, hypotheses, and solutions that largely imply an underlying disappointment in the moral character of their students. The emergence of computers and cell phones have facilitated the expansion of a discourse of distraction which posits that contemporary students have been seduced by these technologies and are now unable to think academically. Given these perspectives, what do students have to say about themselves?

CHAPTER 4: Findings

"What does it mean for the subject that there are no more casement windows to open, but only sliding frames to shove, no gentle latches but turntable handles, no forecourt, no doorstep before the street, no wall around the garden?"

- Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 40

Discussions

Charlotte

> "When grade 12 transitioned from online to in-person, there was no more cheat-sheet. This was hard to transition to."

It is important to note that 'online' and 'new' are in fact synonymous with 'easier' in the minds of at least a couple of the students I spoke with. Charlotte's attestation offers a straightforward testament to the difference between online high school and in-person high school: The former is open book, whether or not the teacher intends this to be so. Thereafter, in-person was not only suddenly more difficult because of this, but it was doubly hard as students found it difficult to get away from thinking that the answers to all questions were just a simple Internet search away. Charlotte, who was in her 1st year of Social Sciences was so troubled by online school that she told me she didn't learn anything once her high school classes went online. "Everything went in one ear and out the other." Before we write off online school altogether though, is it not a common experience for highschoolers to learn nothing, regardless of the online or in-person modality?

Charlotte's thought that online school does not allow students to learn might be a common one. Holding on to this belief, university faculty told me that because of this, they had a

concerted effort to make online school simple and easy compared to their in-person courses from the years before. It is interesting how little influence techno-optimistic ideas held on the professorial imagination. Ideas like the one represented by the gamified Fractions Building from the previous chapter are not wholly dismissed, but instructors admit that new tech-influenced pedagogies are implemented in a way to make things less difficult not only for students, but for themselves. Among the instructors I spoke to, I found only tiny bits and pieces of the argument that people will learn better by using more techy things to motivate students. Instead, the professors I spoke with were generally quite hesitant on an intellectual level to implement new things into their pedagogy. Despite this, however, they do end up adding new and online elements to their syllabi. Below, I provide a compressed example of why instructors have a tendency towards implementing digitalization at the expense of their personal beliefs. I combine two synopses from different professors who each have many years of teaching experience to express this idea because of how similar their sentiments were and how these ideas interplay. These university faculty were selective with their words, careful to avoid sweeping generalizations though also underscoring that their expectations of students have in fact dropped over time due to generational change. Of course, I cannot quote our conversations verbatim due to logistical and identifiable data so instead I will paraphrase their main ideas:

> At McMaster, you are meant to provide three hours of teaching each week. It used to be the case that this was two hours of lecture, and one hour of tutorial, but the tutorials became too expensive for the university to afford. Now, we are still required to provide three total hours. I am very busy, so I sometimes opt to run my courses as hybrid. When a course is administered in a hybrid setting, it requires only two hours of lecture, and then another hour of online learning,

> whether it is a pre-recorded segment, an hour's worth of podcasts, a movie, or otherwise. However, I know that students will not interact with these media as much, and they will not pay as much attention to them as they would to an in-person lecture or a tutorial. Blended courses also allow an exam to be hosted online, which is much easier for me and my TA's. So I put my courses online, but I also feel like I am making my courses too easy for my students, though this has been out of economic necessity on my behalf and the university's behalf. Every semester, students seem a little bit weaker, less engaged, and more entitled. Overall, it feels like they are becoming more unwilling to learn. I think schools have done a disservice by passing too many weak students, because these students cannot do nearly enough work to keep up.

Though the language of this description relies on just two professors, this excerpt represents the general feelings among the university instructors I spoke with fairly well. They did not *blame* the issue of students regressing over time on digital technologies, instead centring the problematic aspect of how they are implemented. This is different from the select literature I cited in the literature review by focusing on the economic elements of implementation rather than what features may be innate to technologizing classrooms. All but one of the professors I interviewed explicitly found that students have been getting weaker over time, though only one mentioned that new technologies implemented in school are involved in making these students weaker. Far from suggesting that digital things—phones and computers and Internet—are causal to students being weaker, options to digitalize pedagogy are instead offered by staff as a way to make things easier. As such, the two become associated. Economic constraints have enabled a

watered-down education that has one less hour of lecture and fewer TAs per student leading to limited or no tutorials. Coincidently, options to digitize classrooms overlap temporally with undergraduate students' access to computers, which they have already been using for their whole lives. While it may not always be the case that it is a cost-saving manoeuvre, it should be understood that the implementation of a digital classroom environment fits neatly into economic efficiency.

While new mediums of pedagogy (the 'hybrid' course, or, PowerPoint presentations overtaking the formal essay) are largely imagined as easier for students by their professors, it is also clear that the experiences of university students interacting with new forms of pedagogy cannot be reduced to a monolithic experience. As some theorists cited in the literature review suggest, contemporary students are categorized as existing within a generation that possesses new and different traits from their predecessors based on social and neurological transformations. In my interview sessions with undergraduate social sciences students, the topic of online school was confirmed to be polarizing. Though there are undeniable similarities between the themes, vocabularies, goals, dispositions and functional preferences that students talked about, no sweeping statement can suffice for a theory on student interaction with online school. There is no such thing as an average student. Some interviewees spoke with uncertainty on this subject, prefacing thoughts with sentiments such as "I'm not sure online school made a difference, but…" and having longer-than-usual pauses before sharing an opinion, indicating that a sort of analytical reflection is suddenly required of them, the same way one hesitates to answer a question on an oral examination. Others expressed extreme certainty, answering complicated questions with a clear yes-or-no answer. For example, one of the questions I would ask students was: "Do you think that people today are more attentive compared to people in the past?" and

one student, Mark, quickly answered: "Definitely not!" It was clear that he had thought about this subject before, and he had strong opinions on it. By describing levels of difference between students, I also underscore how broadly student emotions ranged on this topic. Some described a "hatred" of online school, whereas others spoke about an "enjoyment" of the medium being online.

Early in my fieldwork I had an interesting chat with Aisha, a third year Social Sciences student who eventually found herself majoring in anthropology after a long stint studying chemistry. A veteran student, she recounted how her memory seemed to be affected by the medium of online school specifically. Online lectures would "go by fast, but my attention wanders and would really have to focus. My brain gets really distracted." Aisha then described how, in her process of recalling ideas, these ideas seemed to find themselves associated with physical places, so for her, the ideas learnt in school then would be embodied by the physical lecture halls or seminar rooms or library cubicles she was in when attending school in-person. But when courses started taking place only online, her memories were "overloaded", attached only to the "spatial dimensions" of her room: "When I am in my room I'm just learning *too many things*." She clarified that it was an excess of information that just could not be remembered in the one space, thus she was expected to learn when she felt overwhelmed by the small environment. Her assertion is an important commentary on place and memory. Marc Augé (1992) notes that place in its absolute sense is distinct from how socio-cultural anthropologists have long conceptualized place. Absolute place consists of physical, spatial coordinates which may be mapped, such as Aisha's room. On the other hand, anthropological place is still of course spatial, but it also requires social connections to provide meaning. As such, a place imbued with social connection acquires meaning through its inhabitants. This is obvious when we consider

how we talk about places: for example, a French town centre "comes to life on Sunday" (Augé 1992, 54). One's bedroom could attain the anthropological quality of place, as it certainly has social relations with its inhabitant. However, the social relations that come with online school are not happening in that spatial location, thus, Aisha may be spatially in her bedroom, but socially she is confusingly in the Zoom classroom. As such, a Zoom seminar certainly does not 'come to life' on a Monday morning, and it does not have spatial coordinates. I noted how distinct Aisha's level of certainty was when she told me that "you remember *analog* school better". Thus, her memory recall of school information is tied to social relations, which are related to place, both of which are uprooted by online school. After this interview, I figured that most of the students I spoke with would espouse similar thoughts to Aisha's because of the spatial component of memory. Disdain for online education continued when I spoke to Mary, a bioanthropology student, who told me that "I prefer in-person learning due to a medical condition. I had a severe concussion a few years ago that left me permanently light-sensitive. I am especially sensitive to the electronic lighting of devices so I much prefer not having to stare at a screen." Thus, Mary recognized that online school could harm her health.

But after this interview, I struck the opposite pole where my research participant saw health benefits in e-learning. Social psychology student Siobhan noted that her disability considerations left her looking to take as many courses online as she could: "Health problems [make it] helpful to take online classes … [so it] depends what phase of my life I'm in. I have a preference for in person, but it is often not accessible to me." Challenges to an early conclusion to my research question continued when I spoke with Olivia, an archaeology student, who agreed that online courses have been a good thing for her, but for the opposite reason Aisha talked about. Olivia said that online school is actually better for learning concepts. Describing herself as

a "self-directed learner" (cf. Hussman & O'Loughlin 2019) she noted that the "pacing" of online school helps her slow things down. She was not alone in considering this helpful. As information is not absorbed in a set duration of time for everyone, this should hardly be surprising. More and more students I conversed with ended up highlighting how they would slow down pre-recorded lectures. Alternatively, they would even speed up pre-recorded lectures or podcasts if the content was already understood so that they could accomplish more tasks in less time. Still, many students I spoke with described online courses as *easier*, and not just because of the inherent cheat-sheet that Charlotte confessed to at the beginning of this chapter. Here, instructors are on the same page as their students, as they admitted to me that they would ease grade penalties over the period where online school was necessary due to COVID restrictions. It is important to consider the meaning of 'easy' courses especially when students have the goal of obtaining optimal grades.

Grades

When I was talking to Olivia, I thought something was amiss as it seemed like there was something on her mind that she was nervously waiting to tell me. Everything about the interview matched the typical structure of how I would talk to other participants in my study about school experiences. We talked about her study habits, where she described in detail the things that help and hinder her learning. But once we started talking about the behaviour of other students in her classes, her attitude changed. As an above-average student, she noted that her grades were lower when she had to take online courses; furthermore, she said that her fellow students reported the same issues with grades. But where her classmates had excuses, Olivia took personal responsibility for her academic shortcomings. It appeared that what she was about to say had been on her mind throughout our whole conversation: "it makes me mad that people think that

[school being online] *made* students unable to properly focus … It's kind of a cop out." With this expression of honest disappointment, Olivia identifies the discourse of distraction that commentators and students reflect on. As previously mentioned, this discourse suggests that school taking place adjacent to the online world makes it harder for students to concentrate on schoolwork. Regardless of whether this is the case empirically, Olivia's anecdote demonstrates that the mere notion that online is distracting is enough to change the habitual behaviour of a student by giving up. As stated by her, the belief that online school causes an inability to properly focus can be used as a 'cop out' by students to excuse their poor grades.

Even though Olivia's grades were lower when she had her entire semester online compared to when she had in-person semesters, she attributes this to herself rather than a quality intrinsic to the medium of course delivery. And, even though Olivia theoretically agrees with Aisha's notion of memory as she noted to me that she "remembers things better in-person" and that it is "harder" to hold discussions online, she felt that her lower grades could not be attributed to "a matter of difficulty". The discussion of assessment by grading has unique implications for online school, as it seems to impact student motivation.

Schoolwork assessed by a grading system, in an idealized sense, intends that the grade fairly represents some combination of ability, effort, and knowledge. However, it is unclear if most students believe this anymore. Today, even professors distrust grades: some educators are aware that grades largely reflect effort and a student's socioeconomic background while facilitating "minimum effort" from the "bright students" (Côté and Allahar 2007, 34).

Susan Blum (2016) argues that "high achieving students [i.e. those with high grades] 'do school'" in the sense that they are "playing" their teacher's grading schema by focusing on meeting assignment criteria rather than demonstrating ability and knowledge, treating

assignments as a game (121). I relate to this, as it was easy for me as an undergraduate to figure out what sort of theoretical standpoint a professor was influenced by, and then I would write my essays from this perspective even if I did not actually agree with what I was writing, all for the sake of getting a good grade. Students might get 'good grades' if they do a 'good job,' but they can get those same good grades with less effort if they understand how grades are assigned, thus rewarding conformity over individuality.

Accordingly, there is a distrust of grades in university. A common point of conversation among new teaching assistants in my department is how it is difficult to grasp the subjectivity of assessing a student paper. Part of that problem is assessing what fundamentally makes an essay good. As a teaching assistant who assigns grades to students, when I grade a student essays, I feel a sense of alienation by implying that a letter can represent the hard-work and creativity that went into the writing process. This feeling happens a lot and is inherent to assignments that are graded. It also feels unjust to learning as a process to assign poor grades to students who failed to follow the essay's instructions but nonetheless wrote a well-argued and thoughtful piece, even if it is decidedly unrelated to course content.

Like their instructors, many of the students I spoke with also expressed a distrust of their grades. They would talk about how external factors can influence grades that they have little to no control over, such as grade inflation, grade freezes, COVID-19 and other illnesses, family crises, bullying, friend-group spats, disability, and of course, the course modality. Some students even spoke about grades not making any sense: Josephine admitted to me that online classes present somewhat of a "paradox" for her, as she felt as though she must put in more work to maintain the previous level of understanding which in-person education gave her. Yet despite this she had better grades when her classes were moved to being strictly online.

Simply put, grades are not entirely independent from the social lives of students, which of course, were largely transformed over the COVID-19 pandemic. Though, for some students who do believe in the sanctity of grades, it must be disheartening to hear their peers question their immutability. Perhaps this is why Olivia took issue with her classmates suggesting that forces external to their own agency could impact focus on an individual level.

In interviews I held with other students, I asked them if they felt that their learning was better or worse during their online courses. Sometimes this resulted in the undergraduates pulling out their phone and checking their transcript on *Mosaic*, McMaster's web page that has PDF files of their transcripts, then computing averages in their heads and relaying back to me where there was a quantitative difference in grades. Many students were also comparing the grades between high school and university, making the difference in grades quite meaningless due to extreme grade inflation in Canadian high schools (Crawley 2023, June 20th). Though I would prompt these computations only by asking students if they learned "better or worse" in certain time periods and not asking about "higher or lower grades," the conversations generally found their way there because of the idea that better learning is equated with better grades in the general student imagination. No part of this project looked at the absolute grade number or transcripts, because I am more interested in personal histories and perceptions: the *thoughts* about online school are more important, because grades differ so strongly by institution and year that the actual number value means little. For example, it is a public secret that at McMaster the average grade in the Faculty of Social Sciences did increase quite significantly during the pandemic, though it is coming down now. After all, instructors admitted to providing more accommodations to students. In addition to this, high school marks saw the same trend of grade inflation. The average grade 12 mark in Toronto high schools rose hugely, by six percent from

71 to 77 over just two years during the pandemic (Crawley 2023, June 20th). 64% of McMaster first year students in 2020 entered the university with a grade twelve average of 90% or more, compared to 50% of first years only three years earlier (Crawley, 2023, June 20th).

If grades are imagined as immutable, then these inflating numbers would demonstrate that learning strictly over the Internet has been a great success. Indeed, I remember talking to a faculty member who spoke positively about grades going up over the COVID-online era, suggesting that this phenomenon must be a good thing as today's students must be learning better than their non-online peers had. But of course, this is not actually the case. There are multiple reasons why grades might get perpetually higher, and why the pandemic may have accelerated this. Firstly, instructors can get ahead of their peers by assigning higher grades compared to their fellow instructors. If students manage to exceed their own expectations, the instructors may be rewarded through positive end-of-term evaluations, while the instructors assigning lower grade distributions will receive more negative feedback. Since academic job postings are competitive (especially if one digitally recorded lecture can reach a virtually unlimited number of students), negative feedback can have severe implications. If an institution gives out inflated grades, then that university can advertise that it has high averages compared to other schools in the region when they are recruiting new students. Blum (2016) offers an anecdote from Notre Dame university concerning grade inflation: in 2003 students believed they deserve a B+ on average, but by 2013, students believed they deserve an A- (33). Students and instructors each may have reason to implicitly collude with one another in that they all want higher grades, though for different reasons.

Aside from empirical data demonstrating that grading practices between 2020-2022 are a historical-high, the data from my participants equally doubts the optimistic argument that higher

grades equals higher learning. Other than the students who checked over their transcript or had memorized their marks, students prefaced responses with "umm…" and "I'm not sure …" and then telling me that they *think* their marks stayed the same, got better, or got worse. Of course, I recognize that this qualitative study has too small of a sample size to compare them from a quantitative perspective. But it is meaningful that the queried students had quite a different perspective of how their grades fluctuated, compared with how the average grade at McMaster increased. Their actual grades did not seem to matter all too much. Seven students told me that their grades were worse online, while only four said that their grades were better online. The other five told me that their marks were about the same, or they did not care to know. The reality is that the average mark at McMaster went up in the online school era, yet some of these students importantly felt that grades—their grades, or the average grade—got lower based on how hard it was to produce finished assignments. This inconsistency further demonstrates that while grades conceptually demonstrate ability and effort, this is not always the case in practice. Here, the ethnographic method is able to reveal pertinent information about the disconnect between student perceptions and the reality of grading that otherwise would be absent.

A notable case-study on the nature of instructor efficacy and student perceptions of effort to attain grades comes from Bocconi University in Italy where researchers Braga, Paccagnella and Pellizzari (2011) demonstrated that long term teacher effectiveness negatively correlates with positive student evaluations of teachers. It must be noted that the researchers' measure of teacher effectiveness was to evaluate the subsequent grades of students throughout their university careers after assessing their grades received in a compulsory course. Then, they examined which teachers produced higher average grades in future courses in the discipline. They found that the teachers associated with the best grades in future courses correlated with

worse student evaluations at the time. Braga et al. rationalize this phenomenon by arguing that the poorly evaluated teachers are performing "real teaching" whereas the popular, better-evaluated ones are "teaching-to-the-test" (47). This finding demonstrates the possibility that there are conditions in which grades can be paradoxical: Even when learning is demonstratively better, students can *feel* as though they have learned less. Moreover, as this study indicates, there are also conditions where better grades are associated with learning less.

Madeline, a 5th year student, offered a good explanation of this paradox when she told me that her marks got worse with online classes, stating "online [school] *feels* like more work" therefore "I learn better in-person". This rightly reflects that emotions influence one's motivation. She later said that "it's harder to learn if you aren't interested", and the subjectivity of one's interest in a topic must be determined by how one is feeling at the time. On the other hand, Madeline's comments did not actually make a claim about the workload, just that the work took more effort for her to complete. As reflections from professors indicate that in reality, they assigned less work during the early stages of online school, it is interesting that students like Madeline had the opposite impression. Due to this disconnect I argue that she, like many other students, gives primacy to her feelings rather than being analytical about workload. However, there is an important, contrasting instance where Madeline keenly kept track of her workload: at her job.

Time, Work, Emotions

Jessica

"Attention is when I feel a lot of energy and motivation."

Mark

"Emotions definitely correlate to how much attention I have."

Edith

"It's hard to focus when I'm not in a good mood."

In addition to using language which highlighted her affective state when considering schoolwork, Madeline, like a few other students, explicitly told me that she was not too sure about how much 'absolute' time it took her to complete her schoolwork. But when it came to her paid job, she appeared to keep track of time precisely, such as knowing when last week's shifts started, how long they were, how many hours she works a week, and how late she will probably have to stay until for her future shifts. As her paid work is measured by time, it makes sense to not only keep track of time, but to focus on a task's duration. Her schoolwork, of course, is different: academic tasks are either complete or they are not, so the result is not inherently changed by time the way a waged task is. Moreover, the time required to complete a good assignment for school varies, as quality in this sense cannot be equated purely with time. Indeed, if you have invigilated an exam, you know that an A+ essay can take two hours to write, or it can take twenty minutes. The inverse is true as well; a student who uses the full duration of an exam to write may only be doing so because they are directionally lost. Compared with more labourious tasks, taking more time to do schoolwork hardly matters once a base of critical thinking skills has been built up. In my research, students tended to conceptualize schoolwork without a rigid understanding of time, which was unlike how necessary tasks where *x* is allotted for the activity such as cooking, sleeping, or working jobs were considered: Mary noted that "I *have* to cook" which, strangely enough, made cooking "a way to take a break from school". Madeline basically said the same thing about her job: "Since I am an extrovert, work feels like a break from school for me."

*

Due to a high cost of living, many students increasingly work at full-time or part-time jobs to fund their university studies, especially with rising tuition costs. In fact, Canadian students aged 20-24 are practically at a historical high in recorded labour market participation. The rate of employment during school semesters has steadily risen in the last fifty years in Canada. In December 1976, just 27.8 percent of full-time Canadian students in this age range were employed, while in December 2023, the same demographic saw an amazing 50.2 percent employment rate, though this number has been even higher at times in the past ten years (Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0021-01). Yet, students like Madeline suggested that work "feels like a break" from her academic studies. Though school is important to her, so is her job, as it becomes a repose from challenging academic work, a place where she can socialize with coworkers and customers. This sentiment has been echoed by other students who admit to wanting a break via their summer job after two long semesters. For Canadian students, jobs are increasingly a year-round ordeal.

Roughly based on these employment statistics, about half of the students I spoke to work for wages alongside their schoolwork. But based on how infrequently students talked about work in the informal interview compared with how frequently students brought up other things that distract them, one would not consider that there might be something occupying them for many hours each week that directly places a limit on their time to study. Jobs were mentioned by students as happening in the background, sort of occupying the same 'slot' in their imagination as taking up the same time that functional things like cooking, cleaning, and sleeping do. Activities deemed essential to living take on a natural use of time which is just taken as a given, whereas other things that are not utilitarian for the purposes of immediate continued existence,

like friendships or screen time, take up a lot more ‘space’ in terms of what students mentioned distracted them. This underscores an imagined dichotomy of natural and ‘unnatural’ uses of time, the same way that the concept of cell phones as distracting demonstrates a social dichotomy of important or trivial uses of time as argued in earlier chapters. Though students only briefly mentioned their jobs, in the absolute sense, their jobs are very distracting in that they tear students apart from academic studies, but this was not the case in the student imagination.

As previously noted, literature commentators devise two ‘mentalities’ when it comes to reading: horizontal and vertical, as popularized by Sven Birkerts (1994) in a series of essays that adopt a techno-pessimistic approach. Horizontal reading is a type of reading comprehension that looks at the basic, literal meaning of a text, so a student in a social science course would be using this type of reading strategy when they require an introduction to a topic. On the other hand, a vertical reading strategy is one that is meant to investigate depth and nuance within text, so this mentality is used to think critically about arguments and such. Vertical reading naturally lends itself to academic content, and when reading vertically, paying attention to how long something takes to be read becomes secondary to sufficient understanding. Such differences can also be applied to individual activities based on their perceived utility. Based on the idea that students keep track of time when doing tasks that are conceptually natural and utilitarian, it is easy to see a connection between these things and horizontal reading.

Accordingly, deep vertical comprehension requires a state-of-mind that is delicately nurtured. It requires a different emotive state for each individual, though usually one which is not misery. Most of the students I spoke with described difficulty with challenging schoolwork—vertical reading—when feeling more powerful emotions such as anger or sadness: Aziz mentioned that “if I feel extreme emotions, I can’t give [school] full attention.” Summer

basically agreed, saying “if I feel intense emotions, I am less likely able to focus on school, though if I am *not* feeling negative emotions, I can focus”. Siobhan noted that “unexpected emotions distract me from school.” These anecdotes underscore the imbrication between undertaking challenging tasks and emotions. Some noted that their ability to concentrate was independent from their own willpower, something uncontrollable like the weather. Furthermore, other students categorize barriers to a mental state that facilitates vertical concentration as “writer's block” or “burnout”. However, I must note that some students believed that they could basically just push passed these feelings if they tried hard enough: “I’m pretty good at disconnecting work from emotions.” This was stated by Olivia, who I have noted is a student who is reluctant to agree that digital environments have intrinsically distracting qualities. Still, in sum, I believe it is fair to say that a highly particular, emotionally stable state-of-mind is part of understanding challenging texts and to write text in an academic way that pushes one’s writing ability. Entering this state tends to lead the subject towards a sense of timelessness as the completion of the task becomes primary while accounting for time is relegated to the background. This phenomenon is already quite established in time studies. Ethnographic literature on the relationship between research and time perception finds that academic work is “carried out beyond all mundane concerns and temporal limitations” (Ylijoki & Mäntylä 2003, 62). However, when work itself is a means to an end, such as when it is done for the sake of earning money, individuals have astutely kept track of time. When assignments are intrinsically motivating, students to write them for the sake of learning, but when assignments are perceived as uninteresting, grades become primary so orienting oneself to achieve grades theoretically lends itself to worrying about time. During interviews with students, I would ask them about a moment when they were in a state of deep focus that best facilitated learning for them. Edith’s

response, for example, was representative for many others as she astutely told me that she felt a sense of "timelessness" when she was in the deepest state of focus, as others described the sensation as a "flow state" or being "zoned-in" when they would concentrate the best. According to these students, deep focus lends itself to tasks that require all intellectual resources to be dedicated to their completion, such as reading novels or documenting artifacts in lab. Once the task was suddenly disrupted, time would begin to progress as it normally does.

Remember how one techno-optimist position is that young students are now digital natives, and due to this fact, they are purportedly able to multitask when in their digital homeland, which allows them to consume media for "upwards of 20 hours a day" (Rosen, Carrier & Cheever 2010, 13). In an absolute sense, this measurement is simply wrong, and it attributes a quality onto a generation of students in a way that seems quite ridiculous. But what the optimists are implicitly arguing is that 20 hours' worth of tasks may now be consumed in one day due to digital technology. It is important to note that they are equating *consumption* with *the completion of tasks*, which may be problematic, but it is clear that the use of the doing of tasks is a unit of time measurement that is commonplace when set amounts of time are allotted for tasks. As Elmar Altvater (1989) notes, instruments to precisely measure time are only a recent invention. Prior to this, activity was a standard measure of time (60). For instance, E.E. Evans-Pritchard noted that without such measuring instruments, Nuer people use cattle as their clock, while E.P. Thompson highlighted that time being mechanized was a matter of 'discipline' in industrial workplaces (Thompson 1967, 58, 75). Concerning the changing cultural constructions of individual time perceptions at Finnish universities, Oili-Helena Ylijoki and Hans Mäntylä (2003) interviewed academics who would suddenly refer to time as a commodity which can be "'bought', 'stolen', 'saved' and 'borrowed'" (62). Due to the rise of neoliberal 'new public

management' (56) policies in the country, Finnish academics began to astutely keep track of the time they spent on academic tasks for monetary accounting purposes at times when they previously were not mandated to. Ylijoki and Mäntylä provide an example of a university researcher who says that they "steal time" from their funding body by stating to it that a task will take one month to complete while they know they will actually finish it before the month is up, in order to work on other, more personally interesting research (62). 'New public management' policies attempt to make academic work more efficient by accounting for time. In addition to Marilyn Strathern's (2000:318) critique that such policies encourage raw publishing over producing quality papers as academics attempt to fulfil metrics which problematically attempt to quantify scholarship, the centring of time that is entailed in such policies may disrupt the 'zoned-in' sense of 'timelessness' that occurs during the completion of academic work.

In *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin (1969) wrote that the capitalistic mode of production has a tendency to "exploit the proletariat with increasing intensity" (1). Deleuze in *Control Societies* notes that this is either done by stretching how much labour can be completed during a bounded period of time and space by making things more efficient and ergonomic, or, by stretching the period of time and space altogether (1992, 3-6). By workplaces accounting for time in places that they did not used to, they make an attempt on the former while increasing 'exploitation' in the Marxist sense. But Benjamin (1969) critically notes that "the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence." (5) As a social mode of existence changes, so too do our perceptions, and as such, it can enact a social transformation. The transmission of information on the Internet attempts to remove space altogether by limiting distance (Hannay 2005, 129), thus, efficiency through increased time. The new society of 'digitally native students' may well be able to *consume* 20 hours a day of tasks by

multitasking with computers, but it must be noted that this phenomenon is not independent from changing attitudes in society which stem from management policies which obsessively account for time. If 20 hours of tasks may be consumed, it becomes clear that consumption and completion are not compatible with one another in a useful sense.

Engagement

Imogen

> "Maybe teachers think this tech stuff is more engaging."

Mary

> "… watching online lectures, I am more likely to get distracted because it is not as engaging."

Jessica

> "[Professors] must want students to be engaged. I know they try; I just can't think of any specific things they do."

Emma

> "If I were a prof … I would make lectures engaging."

"School could be a lot better … it could be more *engaging*" Aisha told me when I asked her if she would change anything about her courses. The word 'engage' appeared in many of the responses to my questions, as noted by the sample quotes listed above. At the time of the interviews, I did not think too much of it, until I realized that this word was being repeated everywhere by students. 'Engage' is not a word you hear every day, though it is not an excessively technical or overly descriptive word either. However, the word appeared in thirteen out of sixteen of the student interviews I conducted, and it was used to describe how school,

ideally, should be. I did not use the word in any of my questions, and it's not really part of my vocabulary either, so its appearance was always unprompted by me thus organically originating in the vocabulary of students. Instructors too, note that engagement is desirable: assignment rubrics encourage engagement with course concepts; they describe active learning as engaging (Freeman et al. 2014, 8414); and remember that Larry Rosen et al. (2010) argued that educators "must find new tools to engage our students" (5) with immersive digital technology.

In my informal interviews with students, 'engage' would most commonly appear when I asked questions along the lines of "what does this professor do to make you like (or dislike) their course so much?" when students were describing their preferred courses and styles of instruction. Their answers would delve into specific practices of instructors, such as when professors lecture with story-like qualities that remind them of films and novels. Aside from preferences for particularities, students would generally suggest that the best instructors are those who "... make school interesting, they engage the class." As this quality seems to be inherently desirable, perhaps it is inconsequential. But I think otherwise.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines something which engages as that which has the ability "to attract and hold fast; to hold by the attention." Hearing it used so much by students quickly felt out of place to me, because I associate its implications in distinctly non-educational contexts. Often, it is used to describe consumerist consumption of media, but one of the other most prominent places where the word frequents is in the field of marketing. Advertisers commonly use the term to write that they are trying to engage people to interact with their advertisements, because viewing them passively is less effective for persuasion. Passively viewing things is ineffective in this industry. Consequently, the advertising subfield of "persuasive design," which is associated with Internet design specifically, is where the word has

its most technical meaning. The online education group *Interaction Design Foundation* writes that their persuasive design teaching strategies can facilitate an individual's ability to modify a "target group's long-term engagement by encouraging continued custom." (IxDF, 5 Aug. 2024) Not only does persuasive design mobilize an attentive behaviour, it also nudges people to continue being attentive to that thing. Writing in an article on *Medium* overviewing the key concepts of persuasive design, digital marketing specialist Lauren Macnab (2021) writes that it is "the practice of understanding and exploiting behavioural psychology to persuade users to engage in a desired behaviour." This works by "focus[ing] on the basic traits of human psychology: … to be praised … to be a part of a social group." Persuasion is not coercive in the sense that it forces people to act a certain way, persuasion just attempts to change actions based on the emotional needs of humans. Clearly, advertising's success at changing behaviours is strong, as advertising is one of the most prominent (and representative) sectors of the global economy, and persuasive design is the cutting-edge of this industry. Though persuasive design might on the face of it appear to be nefarious due to its manipulation of desire, Macnab (2021) writes that persuasive design is not inherently unethical. It can also be used beneficially, say, for pedagogical purposes. For example, it can encourage people to "learn a language, or remember a doctor's appointment." In other words, there are utilitarian reasons to employ behavioural psychology to manipulate desire. The ones we might take an issue with are those that industry experts refer to as "deceptive" or "dark" patterns, like when commerce websites baselessly claim their products are offered at steep discounts or that "time is running out" on a product of unlimited quantity. These practices are nefarious, according to Macnab, and sometimes proven to be illegal (the Federal Trade Commission has frequently been successful in suing corporations for having misleading images on their websites). Though, whether or not deceptive patterns are

used, the application of the technique seems to stifle autonomy. Macnab admits at the end of her paper that "awareness is the key to taking back control of your attention," seemingly suggesting that our own personal thoughts are displaced when external actors apply the principles of persuasive design by mobilizing our emotions for us. Aside from the moral problems associated with this technique, persuasive design is essentially the science of engagement, or, how to best provide external motivation.

Though it may have been contrived for any of the student-interviewees to suggest that "the best teachers are the ones who teach," engagement as an ideology relates to the commercialization of education. Thinking through the field of advertising, my interviewees repeatedly bringing up the idea of engagement posits interesting questions pertaining to education. One has to wonder when, in a historical sense, students developed a need to be persuaded to be interested in school by utilizing psychological research to manipulate them into desiring things by equating them with fundamental emotional needs. Following this, the implementation of pedagogy through persuasion begs the question of motivation for school: What is the point of academic studies if students have no intrinsic motivation to be in school? When students say that they are interested in pedagogical techniques that engage them, it inadvertently responsibilizes the professor to stimulate attentive behaviour in the student, meaning school can look more like the sort of things that you would see in an advertisement. The way the concept of engagement was used among the students I interviewed, combined with the research of persuasive design scholars who posits that things independent of themselves cause engagement by offering a simulation of psychological needs even when they are intrinsically absent.

Furthermore, to be engaged in this sense describes an amorphous form of attentiveness on a topic; it does not specify whether the action requires reading, analyzing, describing, or even thinking. For instance, instead of being termed 'engaging,' a seminar could be better described as something to be carefully assessed. To describe a connection between an individual and a thing as engaging is to have it exist next to entertainment media and advertisements which are developed specifically only to be engaging, while they are also specifically not meant to be analyzed, descriptive, or require any type of assessment. Any media may be engaging, but only particularly thoughtful media may promote specific kinds of reflection.

As the student attestations concerning this make it clear that they are interested in engaging content, Ian Hacking's (1999:34) analytic of a "looping effect" is useful to describe how this terminology itself ends up creating engaging content. Hacking explains that the looping effect is that which establishes that a linguistic category which impacts notions of individual identity (34). Throughout his book *The Social Construction of What?*, Hacking uses this theory to primarily look at diagnoses throughout medical history such as anorexia, madness, or ADHD (34, 100, 102). With these linguistic categories, the mere diagnosis by an authoritative medical figure enacts performative criteria for imagining the diagnosed individual which in turn impacts them socially, legally, and individually. For example, a student diagnosed with ADHD may be treated more carefully in some situations (like standardized testing) but also more callously in others (like with homework) compared to before their diagnosis, but also that this is a phenomenon particular to a specific era (Goodwin 2010; Jacobson 2002, 283). Furthermore, diagnoses of this kind impact self-reflection as they inform decisions about how best to progress in life—all the diagnostic terminology here has at one point or another determined if a person should or should not progress with academics or else take a job in a particular industry suited for

those with the medical diagnosis. Simply put, "people classified in a certain way change in response to being classified" (Hacking 1999, 123).

Of course, the content of school itself is 'indifferent' (Hacking 1999, 105) to how it is classified, unlike people. But the content is created by instructors, and then received by students who interact with one another, and the instructors may choose to modify course content. We already know how student evaluations at the end of the semester can drive grade inflation and lead to individual achievement for instructors. In the same way, the category of 'engaging content' causes instructors to modify and adapt course content to fit this criterion. As noted above, something which is imagined as 'engaging' is something which cuts through levels of aesthetic difference in a problematic sense by equating complicated (scholarly) things with simplistic things. As student tuition is increasingly important for university revenue, thus the continuation of higher education altogether, student desires are highly influential on the creation of course content. The recurring desire for things to be engaging reflects a lack of discretion between entertainment and education, which has even led to the prominent category of 'edutainment.'

Edith

> "High school was all about Kahoot, and it was fun. But my courses now are all traditional, though, there are some videos to 'keep engagement up.'"

In reaction to the student desire for engagement at the other end of the classroom, a few of the professors I spoke with expressed that they feel like lecturing is more like being an actor in a TV show than it is about teaching things. Instructors professed that they feel emotionally drained after lectures, and that their outward personality in the classroom is like "putting on a

mask" that is totally disingenuous from the person they are outside of the classroom. One of the more popular lecturers at the university described how they comically walked around their lectures with a lapel mic and interacted with their students as if they were a late-night talk show host doing a live audience bit to be enthusiastic and likeable for the students. This act was actively imagined to protect against poor end-of-term assessments. Indeed, university instructors have good reason to believe that students favour them depending on how they represent themselves. Recall MacNell, Driscoll and Hunt's (2015) study at a large North Carolinian university where the researchers compared the student reflections of an online class where the instructor's gender identity was concealed for purposes of the study but portrayed as either a man or a woman. Their *student ratings index* (298) gave significantly higher scores when students perceived the assistant professor teaching the class to be a man, whether this was actually the case or not. Importantly, male-perceived profs scored significantly higher in factors that contribute importantly to the overall rating of instructors, such as: professionalism, promptness, fairness, respectfulness, enthusiasm, and praise. Though the researchers found that "students rated the perceived female instructor significantly more harshly than the perceived male instructor" (301), it is also clear that certain categories of personality are more influential towards forming perceptions, such as respectfulness and enthusiasm. To maximize student evaluation scores, professors can benefit most from concentrating on being respectful and enthusiastic, sometimes regardless of actual teaching efficacy. Thus, student evaluations are highly influenced by things that have nothing to do with teaching like one's gender and outward personality, or in a more pandering instance, another study showed how handing out cookies at the start of class highly influenced student evaluations (Hessler et al. 2018).

In *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild (2003) explains that "emotional labour" is an effort to outwardly represent yourself as sociable and pleasant, even in situations where it would be painful to do so: "Your troubles should be masked with a smile" as one workplace pamphlet noted (201). This form of managing emotions would be most applicable to industries that benefit from their clients *not* having a bad day, such as that of a university instructor.

In an educational setting, students have shown that they prefer their professors to act respectful and enthusiastic, instilling confidence and thus a positive emotive state. Most students I spoke with noted that a monotonous and detached style of teaching is the exact opposite of what they value in a lecturer: Madeline went so far as to say that her online calculus lecturer was so "monotone" that "it killed me … I struggled to stay awake." There are probably no instances in education where a cold demeanour would be perceived as helpful by students, but coldness may help teachers be more genuine. Really, there is a disconnect between student desires and teacher needs. Students are looking for educational content that is fun, lively, interesting, and engaging, whereas for instructors to accomplish these things requires additional effort, indeed, emotional labour. This outward demonstration of a disingenuous personality shows a new sense of social falsity at universities, which, as discussed later, may mirror false representations of one's individuality on the Internet.

Internet Content

Studying how young people come to trust what they see online, ethnographers working for the consulting firms Gemic and Jigsaw (a Google subsidiary), Rachel Xu et al. (2024) articulate that young people aged 18-24 largely spend time on the Internet in what they call "timepass mode" (6). Timepass is a state of mind (the authors use the term "information mode" [1]) that is not productive in any sense; accordingly, it is distinct from working on something

("getting stuff done mode" [5]), whether it be educational, social, or necessary tasks. Therefore, timepass mode sits between productive states of mind to "assuage boredom" and provide emotional stability (5, 7). This description of the phenomenon also occurs in my findings, although, this paper's notion of timepass mode is a particularly useful theory for describing tech-induced distraction for two reasons.

Firstly, theorizing that there are mindsets or 'modes' that are suited for certain tasks has been a recurring theme in my interviews. As noted elsewhere, the state of concentration required to write and digest complicated arguments requires a delicately procured emotive state. Students would tell me that they stop working on complicated school stuff (i.e. enter timepass mode) at the whims of their own brain: "I get distracted by my own brain" or, as Summer put it, "I try to focus *but my brain won't let me.*" One response offered a muscular analogy: "I can flex the focus muscle if need be, but it's challenging." These responses establish that a state of concentration is something that is physically and emotionally difficult, that it is something that requires rest in between hard efforts to recharge. Timepass, according to Xu et al., (2024) accomplishes this rest and intermission between work by procuring a sense of affective equilibrium to balance out negative feelings with not-negative ones (7).

Secondly, the activities of timepass mode are unique in that they extend through a variety of mediums, and that they also are imagined to serve a particular purpose: to assuage boredom. While vertical reading requires concentration, the Internet content that is glazed over in timepass mode is "mindlessly entertaining" and has been described simply as "content" (Xu et al 2024, 10). Content, in this sense, is entertaining, but does not necessarily have aesthetic quality in mind. An example that Xu et al. (2024) provide of this is Facebook, which admittedly has "low-quality content" (7), but it is content which can nonetheless be appreciated in timepass mode.

Thus, the content of 'content' is imagined as something which is engaging. Whereas time is usually discussed by a particular action which one plans to do in advance, say, fill out a crossword, activity in this mindlessly entertaining 'timepass' state of mind is reversed so that 'content' is something that is not pre-planned, it is spontaneous and immediately desired.

Of course, timepass is a linguistic category created by ethnographers, indeed, it is not a term that their informants organically provided. Though, for this reason, it is interesting to note because the term reveals how the large social media companies which dominate space on the Internet imagine the usage of their platforms. Remember, this paper was written by consulting firms working for Google subsidiaries for the benefit of "human computer interaction communities" (Xu et al. 2024, 1) which intend to optimize user experience online. Indeed, some content on the Internet is made explicitly with the idea of emotional equilibrium in mind. Low-quality Facebook posts are content which are stimulating but also "so ridiculous," (7) but only stimulation matters in this deprived context. In sum, organizations responsible for the curation of social media feeds are aware that they are creating "low-quality content" (7) that is perceived as ridiculous, but despite this, they have proven to be successful in procuring a mental state of timepass, which, accordingly, is how young people spend most of their time on the Internet—most particularly, by social media.

"Students love social media"

In *Rewired* (2010) by Rosen et al., they write that "students love social media" (107). Such a statement is echoed in any other techno-optimist position which imagines that time spent on the Internet is an extension of meaningful social worlds. While students do indeed spend a lot of time accessing social media, the claim that this activity is universally beloved is disruptive to how the students I interviewed would describe their relationship with social media platforms.

Problematically, statements like this one represent students as a singular entity, which was not at all the case in my research. Yes, some students spoke fondly of their time using social media platforms. But it is equally clear that not all students *love* social media. Take Amanda, for example. Amanda was cyber-bullied over her social media profile as a teenager by other students at her high school, who used the online space to converse in a way that was distinct from how they would converse with her in-person. "[The cyberbullying] made me not want to go to school." This made her shy away from social media for a while. Unlike literature which suggests that Internet profiles offer a positive expression of personality experimentation (see Dreyfus 2008, 104-120), Amanda's attestation instead describes experimentation with one's personality on social media as being more of a false and harmful representation of oneself, as the ability to curate images and statements is unlike social relations outside of the Internet which are more spontaneous and risky. So, the general representation of a student demographic as totally enjoying social media without faults is, at the least, an exaggeration.

More importantly though, the word 'love' is linguistically deceptive in describing interaction with social media. The word love emphasizes deep feelings. Its usage can be very serious in a performative sense as it often ties together legally binding social relationships. But love also has implications of desire, lust, and obsession, all of which can have negative connotations. This latter sense is more accurate when it comes to how students I spoke with described social media: They can feel as though they are trapped, even "addicted" to activity on social media. Amanda, who eventually got back onto social media after her negative experiences represents this sentiment well when she told me that "scrolling [social media] feels like no time, but then I realize an hour has passed." Another group of students lamented that they could not perceive how much time they spent using social media: "How did my screen time go up? Ugh

that's crazy, I spent 11 hours on TikTok. Yeah, *in one week.*" In these situations, the actual duration of time that has passed is unmatched with the individual's perception of time, which caused grief upon reflection.

Victoria

"People are heavily distracted now, and I believe it is social media."

"It could be [that] videos less than 15 seconds are making a generation of goldfish."

"I am a phone addicted teenager. I talk to my friends and classmates, and we agree that TikTok and Instagram are addicting, those two are the worst."

Aisha

"It takes effort to not go on Facebook and to not go on shopping websites while in class."

Mark

"YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram are making us much less attentive than in the past. The brain melt is real."

Social media is an important consideration in the conceptualization of an epidemic of scholarly distractedness. Many of the other students I spoke with who brought up social media did so sheepishly, as if there was something wrong with the fact that it could be included in a conversation surrounding studying habits because of how antagonistic they each are imagined to be.

My data showed that TikTok was the most common social media platform mentioned, as 9 out of 16 students cited it. The parent company to TikTok, *ByteDance,* reaches 49% of Internet users in America according to 2024 data provided by ComScore. To get a sense of how popular this is, ByteDance is ahead of other digital media companies such as Spotify and eBay, but it is

not as big as the social media giant Facebook, which reaches 99% of American Internet users (ComScore February 2024). Although ByteDance has only half as many unique visitors as Facebook, interestingly, students who brought up social media felt the need to specifically highlight TikTok. Victoria told me that all of her friends talk about TikTok and Instagram as being *addicting* platforms, but that the former is the worst of all of them, which she even emphasized after I asked if there were any topics that she felt that we did not focus enough on during our interview. It is appropriate to note that social media *does* have the ability to influence the actions of individuals. Science and Technology Studies scholars deem objects that influence human activity as "actants" to reflect that even though these things are not alive, they are still able to have agentic power over people (Latour 1996, 373).

The idea that objects themselves influence people's behaviour helps us understand why particular social media platforms would be deemed more distracting than others even if they have less absolute popularity. It is useful to investigate how humans interact with social media platforms using Natascha Schüll's concept of the 'machine zone,' which Alexis Madrigal has already started in an article for *The Atlantic* (July 31st, 2013). Essentially, Schüll (2012) argues that gambling devices such as slot machines are a prolific object because the device is able to induce its user into something like a flow state. She specifically refers to this mental state as a 'machine zone' to emphasize the imbrication between technology and psychology. The concept of the flow state originates with the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who used it to describe the experience of suspense and focus synchronously when doing a thing that involves both luck, skill, and risk (Schüll 2012, 166). Managing this state of suspense gives way to a feeling of timelessness, which is distinguished from 'quotidian' everyday experiences (Introduction). As it necessarily precedes normal conceptions of time, it is a liminal state. Slot

machines, Schüll argues, are designed in a way to best create a flow state by enabling "risk within a dependable framework" (13). Schüll argues that doing away with normal experiences of time allows emotions, negative or otherwise, to temporarily dissipate and create "rest, stillness, and peace" (223) in the gambler. But unlike the flow states that Csikszentmihalyi originally described, Schüll's gamblers feel utterly depressed after a gambling-induced flow state. Building on this work, writers such as Madrigal (2013) believe that social media companies use the same principle in their design of websites. Indeed, students mentioned that experiencing social media, generally, induces a feeling of timelessness. As Victoria mentioned, TikTok is infamous for publishing short, compact videos that last for about 15 seconds. If flow states are indeed induced by dopaminergic activities, it stands to reason that one video may basically be equivalent to one unit of completing a task, regardless of its length. The shorter the video, the stronger the flow-state will be as more tasks may be completed in the same amount of time.

*

Social media content is algorithmically dictated by user preferences; however, it is also dictated by what other users like to see. For example, Kyle Chayka (2016) highlights how contemporary coffee shops around the world are styled by social media algorithms in what is a more obvious 'looping effect'. All coffee shops these days (or at least, around 2016) seem to be decorated with "minimalist furniture, reclaimed wood tables, and industrial lighting" while selling "craft beer and avocado toast," and are decidedly "hipster". No doubt you too can picture this place, independent of large geographic distance between each coffee shop. The reproduction of this aesthetic of sameness is created by social media platforms such as Foursquare, a website which algorithmically recommends stores to its users that other users in its online community are familiar with and have given good ratings to. This example reflects a virtual thing operating as

an actant and influencing how real-world places come to exist. It is also an example of the Internet as a mechanism that accelerates globalization as it cuts through distance.

In *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, Marc Augé (1992) notes that places and cities around the world are beginning to appear homogenous, more like one another as the things that comprise them such as supermarkets, parking lots, and highways are basically the same throughout the world. These places make us "feel constrained by uniformity, by universal sameness" (XII). Augé terms these distinctly similar places "non-places," not because they are inherently bland but because of their lack of social ties with humans (34). As previously noted in this chapter, the category of anthropological place requires more than just spatial coordinates, it also requires humans to deem it individually distinct and personally meaningful. Indeed, each place has its own "degree of sociality and symbolization" (VIII). Unlike, say, churches, a supermarket for instance has almost nothing separating it from other supermarkets, on a social level. While the supermarket chains in Toronto may be different from those in Tokyo, they are nonetheless historically more similar than they ever have been before. The architectural dimensions of these places follow an efficient, utilitarian form based on their individual function. All supermarkets *basically* look the same, and this is further influenced by the fact that distance is shortened by technologies of travel such as boats and airplanes, which cut the time between distant places (79). Today, social media platforms on the Internet are technologies which accomplish the same reproduction of homogeneous spaces. While each category of non-places is aesthetically similar, each non-place can have specific degrees of anthropological placeness located on a continuum; it is only a tendency for places to become less placeful, this is phenomenon is not absolutely true. For instance, the constraining 'hipster coffee shop' is one of the more social 'supermodern' places as it probably has its own name as well as a group of

workers and customers who all interact with each other specifically because of the place itself. But other non-places are more industrial and even more supermodern, such as airports and banks where people who enter them have no discernible social identity other than being equated with numerical values.

We can visualize these sorts of places as being homogeneously non-descript and lacking elements to foster sociality, though it is important to note that places on the Internet follow the same mechanisms. In fact, the hipster coffee shop is an embodiment of the preferences of an Internet community which has inadvertently worked to remove individuality from place, as successful architectural tropes will be copied at a rapid rate due to unprecedented information sharing. Yet, as a student named Imogen astutely noted, "there is something kind of magical … about spatial marcation [of in-person classrooms compared to online classrooms]." Places being individually distinct from one another provides the ability for humans to demarcate them so that particular places are meaningful to particular individuals and societies. Imogen's description of places being magical matches Augé's argument about places: there are degrees to which each place is magical. The supermarket, the bank, or the airport are disenchanting, while a holy site where a religious figure passed through may be sacred. Indeed, even the lecture hall where a renowned academic spoke may be distinctly meaningful and the lecture hall may one day be named after her.

Returning to an argument from Chapter 3, Augé (1992) highlights that "portable telephones are also cameras, … a television, and a computer" so that the supermodern "individual" can live "wholly independent of his immediate physical surroundings" (VIII). Indeed, techno-optimists have attempted to recreate the world into an online place that is tuned to each individual's liking, and this may now be facilitated through digital technology. However,

the utopian "virtual metacity" (Augé 2008, XII) will never have the kind of 'magic' that distinctive spatially demarcated places have.

Loneliness

Victoria

"I miss my friends from home. The only way I can talk to them is through texting."

During COVID-19 social distancing protocols, the only way for students like Victoria to communicate with her friends was through online means. Importantly, communication through texting still left Victoria missing her friends.

Jessica, a student now in her 4th year, keenly astute to anthropological literature on liminality noted to me that she did not go through the rites of passage that a standard Canadian high school student goes through. She had no prom, no graduation, and no concrete 'last day of school' either. For her, such events could not be replaced with online social interaction. They had to happen in-person. Thus, online interaction did not satisfy 'real' social interaction for these students, though it was the only way to even attempt to fulfil their socialization needs, setting in perpetual motion a process of longing incomplete social action.

Victor Turner's (1967) classic study on rites of passages is canonical in anthropology—so much so that Jessica cited it to make sense of ritual in her own life. In first year anthropology courses, students especially identify high school graduation as a rite of passage that transforms them *betwixt and between* the stages of adolescence and adulthood. COVID-19, which made school online, took these meaningful rites of passage away from students. If rites of passage are truly meaningful, as Jessica and thousands of other anthropologists believe, this cohort of

COVID students were unprepared for their next step, continuing their "limitless postponement" of school that never ended up being marked with a graduation rite (Deleuze 1992, 5).

Conclusion

Though swathes of commentators ranging from academics to newspaper editorialists treat the qualities of a digital objects as primary, the instructors I chatted with by and large make associations between the deskilling of teaching with the implementation of digital technologies. As classrooms push the individuality of the instructor away, course content becomes homogenized, and even begins to resemble working environments. While this phenomenon is occurring, students differentiate between their conceptualization of time when focusing on utilitarian matters compared with trivial matters. Students advised me that their highest form of concentration involved pushing time to the side, which counters some managerial theory. However, this ideology of new management practices may even be expanding to schoolwork, which under this regime becomes conceptualized as a task which is to be completed as if time is of the essence as if it were remunerated by the hour. Students interviewed for this research, as well as academic workers in other ethnographic contexts have conceptualized that their best efforts toward concentration take place independent of 'clock time'. But as grades become primary, there becomes a calculus of cost effectiveness which ostensibly increases productivity, at the certain expense of concentration. The practice of centring time makes individuals wary of it, thus they are relegated to understanding things on a cursory, 'horizontal' level. While horizontal understanding may be useful for waged jobs which require only a rudimentary level of knowledge to fulfil an industrial number of tasks, schoolwork has classically valued rumination on just a small number of topics at a time.

Ethnographic findings from students connect with literature that suggests that actions facilitated over the Internet and Internet-coded places inherently foster a loss of individuality and a loss of risk. Furthermore, socializing on the Internet is usually made up of highly curated interactions that are not possible in the world outside of online social spaces, which do not have a 'backspace' key.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

"I feel like, when I grew up I would go outside and play with friends, doing stuff like catching frogs. But now everyone is busy, and my cousins are just on their tablets. A lot of people are not paying attention to their life."

- Madeline

The ethnographic component of this thesis has looked at the personal attestations of students and professors commenting on their experience with two things: school taking place online, and school taking place next to distracting digital things like cell phones. In sum, experiences of each have influenced the other and based on these attestations there is reason to believe that the Internet, broadly, is a place that challenges one's effort to maintain focus on deeply complex tasks. The ethnographic findings largely consist of student attestations that social interactions in their online context is wholly unfulfilling when treated as a social activity. Furthermore, students claimed that because of this, it is difficult to care about online school.

In the literature review, I also examined the way that the teacher-public writes about digital technology modifying student behaviour, which I termed the 'discourse of distraction.' This discourse itself serves as a trope to be engaged with during commentary on the nature of today's students. Despite emphasizing the way the linguistic category reflects on people's actions, it is important to note that these narratives are situated within a social context that enables distraction as a feature while, ironically, moralizing about it.

My initial research question that started this project was wondering why students in my classes seemed to be polarized about the subject of online school as either only a good thing or a hated thing. But as shown in the literature review and the findings chapters, perceptions of online

school are complicated, and it is not so simple to suggest that the only viable commentary is through polarizing debate. True, common approaches adopt either a techno-optimist or techno-pessimist position, but this alone does not capture the varying attitudes towards online school. Even those who believe in the merits of online school had their doubts, saying for example, that it was only good up to a certain, ineffable point. If you were to ask Jessica, a fourth-year student who has as much experience doing school from physical lecture halls as she does from her room, whether online school is better or worse, out of context she would tell you that online school is better, but that this is not the full story. For example, she stated earnestly that "online [school] may be more effective" for learning—a great headline for those optimists. Except, she followed this up with the fact that "you totally miss out on being able to interact with your professor or TA *… I wouldn't trade socializing with professors and TAs for online school"*. Jessica presents us with a paradox. To her, online school provides more effective learning, but she does not want to take part in it. Can it merely be because of a lack of social interaction?

The philosopher Hubert Dreyfus lays out an argument as to why online school should have very limited success in facilitating learning at a university level—in fact, largely due to the lack of social interaction. As I have noted, social interaction has been an unavoidable point of conversation in my informal ethnographic interviews.

To claim that social interaction matters for learning, firstly, Dreyfus claims that there are various degrees of skill starting with 'novice' and finishing with 'mastery'. Novice skills are those achieved through "drill and practice" (Dreyfus 2009, 28) which is the first step in learning something. In a social science curriculum, this would be like memorizing what key terms will be on the exam. This is the beginning to all other levels of skill, but alone, it is insufficient to do anything significant with. However, Dreyfus argues that this level of skill does in fact translate to

the online medium: “[at this stage] they don’t need to be in a classroom with each other and a teacher at all. … in this way the Internet can offer an improved version of the corresponding course” (28).

Yet, novice skills based on memorization should be taken for granted at a university level. Once a student progresses to a level of education that requires higher skill, they begin to require interacting with peers as well as an instructor, and in this situation, the online medium is inevitably unable to live up to expectations. The great objective of learning in a university is to develop ‘critical thinking’ skills, and rightfully so. Critical thinking is a term used by almost every teacher at nearly every stage of education, and oftentimes it is apparent that a class has not fostered critical thinking in spite of its promise, so it is natural to be skeptical of the idea. The skill is not developed by completing only a handful of brief assignments, though critical thinking is often promised as something that provides immediate results.

Despite the shortcomings of critical thinking as a technical term in curricula, when used appropriately it is a useful term which is able to explain the assessment of learning that is more advanced, as it is in say, in university-level social sciences courses. In social science curricula, a student is largely assessed by how effectively they can connect social theory—the abstract ideas they learned about in class—to real world phenomena, such as their own lives. A student assignment will be particularly excellent if it does this originally and maybe even calls into question the validity of a much-canonized theorist. Alternatively, a poor assignment that is devoid of critical thinking does not understand the application of any theory, even if it got all the individual facts pertaining to the topic correct. Unlike a discipline that is only interested in what is ‘true,’ social sciences generally take truths as a given first step to develop a more meaningful,

larger argument about how these facts transform social conditions or how they became truths in the first place.

As for social science assessment, a purely descriptive effort does not demonstrate analysis, nor critical thinking, thus it fails to be significant. It takes a more developed level of skill to discern what is good or bad theoretical analysis, thus it is not something that a novice can do after memorizing a few key terms. As far as social science assignments go, good or bad theory is most poignantly obvious when a student is looking for a re-grade. Generally, the student will say: I went to class, I read the articles, and my facts were right. Despite all of that I did poorly. Why?

In one first year anthropology course at McMaster, students are instructed to read a brief article by Horace Miner (1956) called "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema." It is quite short, and it uses irony to criticize classical ethnological theory. The essay is meant to flip cultural judgement on its head by writing about American society using the prose of an Orientalist ethnographer who would normally not be writing about their own society (Nacirema is 'American' spelled backwards). Last term, I was a TA marking student essays written about the Nacirema. In more than a few first-year papers, it was clear that the irony of the original essay was lost on the unaware students who were not using sufficient critical thinking in lecture. At my office hours, they would tell me that everything in their essay was true according to the reading, and they even went to class and took notes. Yet after all that effort, one student still came to my office hours arguing that the Nacirema actually were a tribal group of people living somewhere in Africa. Indeed, this anecdote distinguishes what it means to have a purely horizontal understanding of something based only on memorization of text. Truly, irony is the rhetorical device of the 21st century.

This example also reveals the distinction between two ways of conceptualizing the completion of a task which was discussed in Chapter 4. One is understanding what you have done, while the other is merely spending time with an activity—this has importantly been called 'consuming' something, as in, consuming a piece of entertainment media. The latter conceptualization stems from keeping track of time based on working shifts where tasks are timed and remunerated by the hour (Ylijoki & Mäntylä 2003; Altvater 1989). Likewise, the students who miss the irony in Miner's (1956) *Nacirema* essay have completed a task in that they have 'spent time' to read it, though this level of comprehension is wholly incomplete when it comes to demonstrating critical thinking and significantly comment on the state of society. In my interviews I found that when students are concentrated on completing challenging school tasks, the perception of time is relegated to the background.

So, to develop critical thinking, students must be emotionally invested in improving (Dreyfus 2009, 31). This has been clearly demonstrated throughout this research's ethnographic component, in which students and professors largely associate good academic work with not-negative qualities or not-negative emotions, while emphasizing that states of deep concentration are facilitated by dedication to the subject matter. The student who attempted to convince me that Horace Minor was wrong about the *Nacirema* people was evidently embarrassed, which is one 'step' towards improvement by ensuring that such an awkward event will, hopefully, not happen again.

Dedication is structurally challenging through the medium of the Internet because of a lack of risk. As previously noted, communication on the Internet facilitates anonymous social interactions to a degree. Even in a class that takes place on *Zoom*, there is some anonymity granted through text chat, emoticon responses, and possibly a lack of voice and visualization of

faces. In an in-person classroom setting, if a student were to say something totally offensive, they would lose social standing among their peers. Depending on the degree of offense, there will be social repercussions somewhere between embarrassment and ostracization. But this can be largely avoided on *Zoom.* While interviewing instructors, a common complaint that they had about online school was the phenomenon of the black square. On *Zoom,* participants in the meeting who did not have their camera turned on had their visual identity represented by a colourless square with their initials in the middle of the box. From an instructor's perspective, "it feels like pulling teeth, not hearing a voice, not seeing a face." This phenomenon is ubiquitously disliked among instructors who are used to seeing a room full of students, and for good reason. Firstly, being able to visually read the room is important so that an instructor can adjust the pacing of their lecture and spend more time mulling a problem that students appear to be struggling with. Most importantly, the black square represents an unequal social interaction because the people with their cameras turned on are risking 'face' when they make comments, while the more anonymous participants risk less social standing among their peers in the classroom. In the words of an instructor "it was so different to foster community in a room of black squares." Indeed, students will be unable to develop dedication in such a setting because there is such little room for risk and embarrassment in that setting.

Emma

"For me, learning is personal."

Improvement of skill requires a learner to *feel* responsible for the choices that they make (Dreyfus 2009, 31). Lesser levels of understanding will flourish if the learning community is emotionless. Virtually every student I spoke with had some obscure favourite topic of theirs that

they at one point spent hours daydreaming about. “Students tend to imitate their teachers” (32) which is why, again, virtually every student liked ‘engaging’ professors and disliked a robotic sort of lecturer who did not seem to care about whatever subject was being covered that day. If the instructor over Zoom was represented by a black square, risking nothing, surely there would be no interest in learning that day.

Contemporary neuroscience research demonstrates that even if the black squares of Zoom were all eliminated and replaced with high-quality webcam feeds, the face-to-face interaction facilitated by screens and cameras provides insufficient social stimulation in the brain. Joy Hirsch et al. (2023) found that neurological responses had measured differences when comparing Zoom-like interaction between people over webcams, compared to in-person interaction (1) based on representation of faces over screens and actual faces in front of them. Although webcams provide some social risk to online school, it should be recognized that from a neurological standpoint the video representations do not sufficiently trigger normal neurological responses induced by actual face-to-face interaction.

In addition to screens providing a less-stimulating representation of people, screens also provide lesser haptical interaction when reading and writing. Aziz, an undergraduate student who was learning a new language noted that this was more challenging online. For Aziz, his “brain couldn’t engage with the online context,” noting that the senses of “sight and hearing [alone] are not enough” to learn with. He first described analog technologies of learning with reverence, giving the example of a blackboard, because of the blackboard’s ability to convey the imperfections and nuances of each character written on it. He then lamented the digital alternatives to blackboards that were offered in his classes. Languages theorist Anne Mangen offers insight into this phenomenon. Mangen studies literacy, but specifically how humans

interact with reading and writing mediums. Mangen and Velay (2010) note that paper-and-pencil or type-on-paper produce better outcomes for reading comprehension when compared to digital text (387). In another essay, Mangen, Walgermo and Brønnick (2012) concluded that tenth grade "students who read text in print score significantly better" in reading comprehension compared to students who read digital text (61). Computer screens have many hindrances that slow reading ability, such as scrolling, digital refresh rates, high contrast, and fluctuating luminance (Mangen, Walgermo & Brønnick 2010, 62, 65). In multiple aspects, the Internet facilitates a level of unreality. Perhaps communication through digital technology facilitates the divisible focus of horizontal thinking.

Siobhan

> "COVID brought new technologies to light, the means of learning that didn't exist before that now distract me couldn't have in the past."

Completing tasks as merely 'doing' or 'consuming' the action may be well-suited to environments which require task-switching between unrelated emails, meetings, workshops, PowerPoints and such. However, in order to do more complex things, concentration is required. On the other hand, many other jobs require constant task switching (Zavodna, Sara Lucie, and Torberg Falch 2022, 117) to remain vigilant and adaptable to market trends. In academic practice, this is like the difference between writing myriad emails and one journal article (Berg & Seeber 2016, 30-31). Indeed, this reflects policy in Ontario: that education should be, first and foremost, to prepare students for the workplace, thus, to develop a mind which swiftly understands cursory instructions but is careful to not ruminate on a topic for an extended

duration of time. Thus, I argue that the divided attention of students has everything to do with public policy.

In this thesis I highlighted that working on academic matters is distinct from working on commercial tasks. Parallel to this neoliberal orientation for individuals is the appeal of online school for institutions, as it is able to efficiently distribute content (Dreyfus 2009, 46-47) which is normally limited by barriers such as space and distance (Deleuze 1992). The neoliberal attitude on the behalf of university institutions minimizes costs for financial efficiency, and in this case the COVID-19 pandemic may be a fine stimulus to accelerate online school as a valid form of receiving an education.

The analytic that online school may allow for the equivalent of 20 hours a day of content consumption (Rosen, Carrier & Cheever 2010) may indeed be the case for horizontal reading strategies but not when understanding becomes primary as it does in school. Indeed, thanks to the Internet, time, like space, may no longer be "enclosed" (Deleuze 1992, 3) as online lectures may be played at double speed. As the ideology which imagines education as entertainment media spreads throughout school institutions, there will arise tensions between the old school and the modern innovators. However, so long as school focuses on critical thinking, students will never be able to functionally engage in 20 hours of coursework each day.

Spending time on the Internet in a state of tech-induced distraction in between doing schoolwork has been referred to via terms such as "timepass" by anthropological consultants who influence the development of social media websites (Xu et al. 2024). The phenomenon of timepass is reminiscent of Theodor Adorno's (1991) argument that the notion that society has of free time is not 'free' in the sense that humans can be allowed to do things to their own liking during free time. Instead, the activities that are 'consumed' during free time are determined by

what Adorno terms the ‘culture industry’ (187). Basically, because free time occupies the temporal space in between work, it is a liminal period to ‘recharge’ with, therefore, it is not independent from time spent at work. Moreover, Adorno argued that aesthetic theory should recognize this phenomenon to properly understand the function of art in modernity. He wrote that art is now designed with the intent to be emotionally soothing (195) rather than being designed with complexity that requires “all my attention” (189) to appreciate it, which is how art, when patronized by “its feudal protectors,” was created (Adorno 1945, 196). Artistic direction dictated by the marketplace or by the ideology of the ‘culture industry’ is almost exactly how web designers ideally envision what ‘content’ will be most effective to further engagement with social media: that which does not cause users to “become irritated and disengage entirely” (Xu et al. 2014, 10) is perfect, regardless of its low-quality. Adorno (1991:188) lamented that “free time is becoming a parody of itself” which happens to be the case with the curated uncreative aesthetic that is so successful on the Internet. Altogether, curated ‘Internet content’ exists as a stop-gap in between periods of emotively disruptive work. Social media web designers actively curate ‘content’ which is to be consumed rather than completed to facilitate a passive timepass state of mind as Internet-based organizations interact with customer feedback, fulfilling a ‘looping effect’. Remember, this same phenomenon happens with professors as they actively change course content to integrate particular sets of emotive expressions based on student feedback. Adorno believed that once art was no longer commissioned by aristocrats, art dictated by the feedback loop of the market became passive and uninteresting resulting in a society-scale “deconcentration” (Adorno 1991, 49). Indeed, ever since school’s content became dictated by the market through tuition increases and a philistine orientation towards commercial efficiency, it too has been criticized by the public for no longer requiring concentration.

On March 20th, 1999, Judith Butler argued in *The New York Times* that effective social criticism can only be expressed through "difficult and demanding language" to "provoke new ways of looking at a familiar world." They argued that without reimagining the world anew, reactionary social thinking such as homophobia and racism will be entrenched in common sense. As such, Butler believes that great critical thinkers were those such as Adorno, who "wrote sentences that *made his readers pause and reflect.*" Regardless of whether one believes that society requires critique, it must be the case that questioning anything is not possible without complexity which challenges entrenched beliefs. This way of reading a sentence is antagonistic to what has perhaps become the ideological notion that understanding may be accelerated by technologies.

In sum, as computers were entering workplaces in the 1980s, they became the object of study for cultural anthropologists who argued that these machines would or would not cause revolutionary change in people's workplace environments. Of course, this debate extends to this day, inside and outside the academy. At the time though, some anthropologists claimed that computers would drastically deskill tasks making it part and parcel of neoliberal ideology (Parker & Jary 1995, 320) while others highlighted that gendered power relations in workplaces will be transformed by the mechanization of secretarial work (Hakken 1993, 108). Bypassing these debates altogether, David Hakken (1993:125) instead highlighted an anonymous anthropologist who expressed this perspective: "Who cares whether computers are really changing society? The fact that employers think this is true means that they are more open to thinking about the way that information systems can affect organizational culture." Today, as the category of distraction has associated itself with computers, this is precisely what has happened.

I want to concretely reiterate that the degree of belief that students held over how much influence the brain and emotions have over their ability to work on challenging academic tasks seems to influence how much their concentration was impacted by online school. Olivia, the student who told me that her peers were participating in a "cop out" by blaming online school for their lack of effort, notably told me that she was "pretty good at disconnecting work from emotions … Classes being online didn't change anything for me." By personally disagreeing with the central trope of the discourse of distraction, Olivia was able to stay concentrated on school whereas her classmates allowed the discursive association between digital-as-distracting to manifest onto their attention. Throughout my thesis I have laid out theories and research which demonstrate lesser pedagogical efficacy with online school, but the ethnographic findings demonstrate that these factors can be amplified by self-doubt and adherence to the discourse of distraction.

The notion that computer technologies are "really changing society" by enabling a crisis of attention in schools is also something which is held to be true by more and more of the public since the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of whether it is *really* the case or not, which has been debated endlessly, it happens to be the case that students, instructors, administrators, politicians, writers, journalists and academics often believe that this phenomenon is happening. I agree that it is happening as well, but that is beside the point. The existence of the discourse of distraction has contributed to many actual things happening: Higher grades, lower grades, distraction grades, easier assignments, harder assignments, digital assignments, fun assignments, online school, an uprising against online school, edutainment, video games, medicalization, cell-phone bans, organizational economic policy and more, including, of course, government policy pertaining to the mitigation of COVID-19.

Edith

"If I can train myself to have a short attention span through TikTok, then I think the opposite is also possible."

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