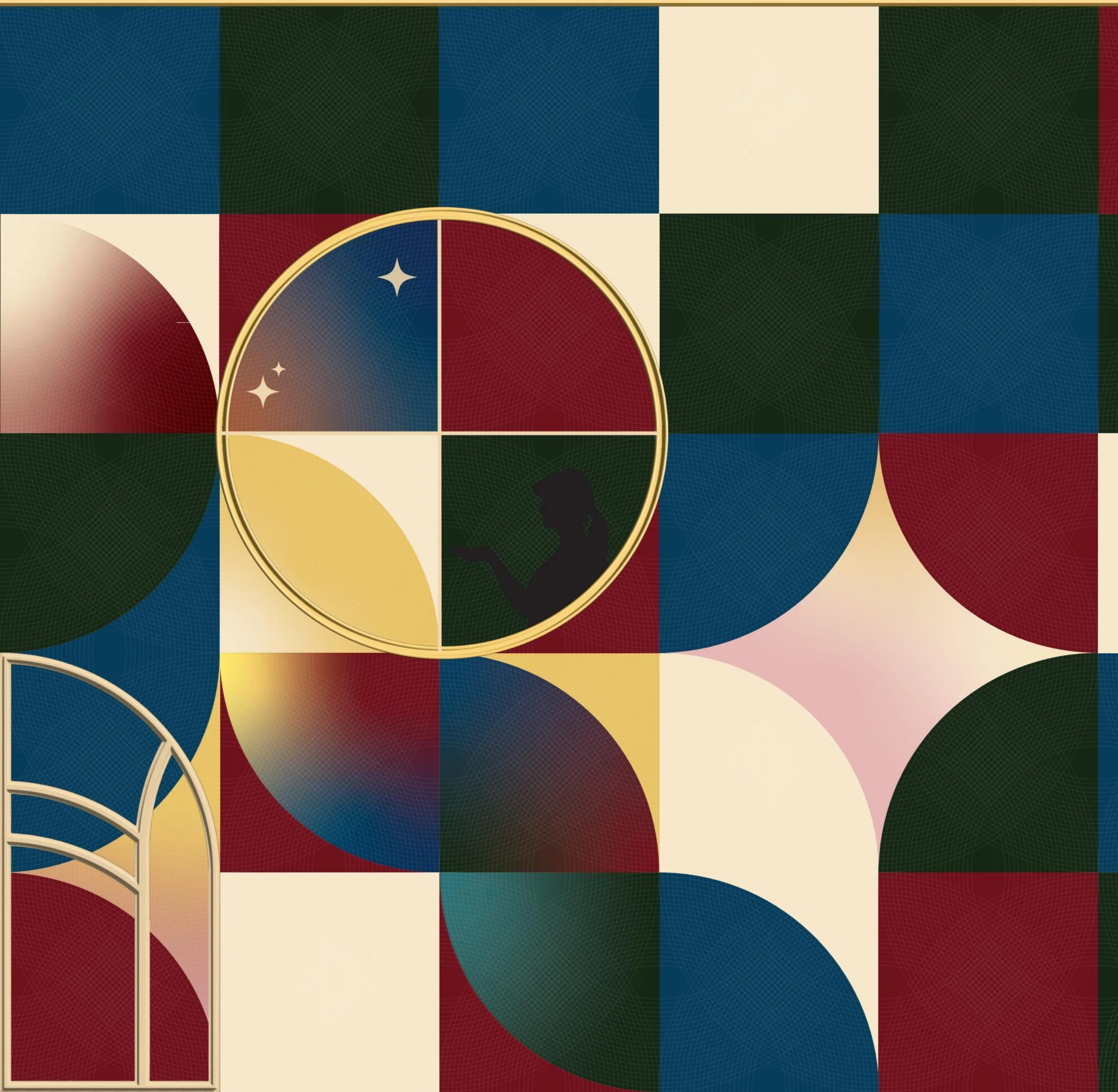
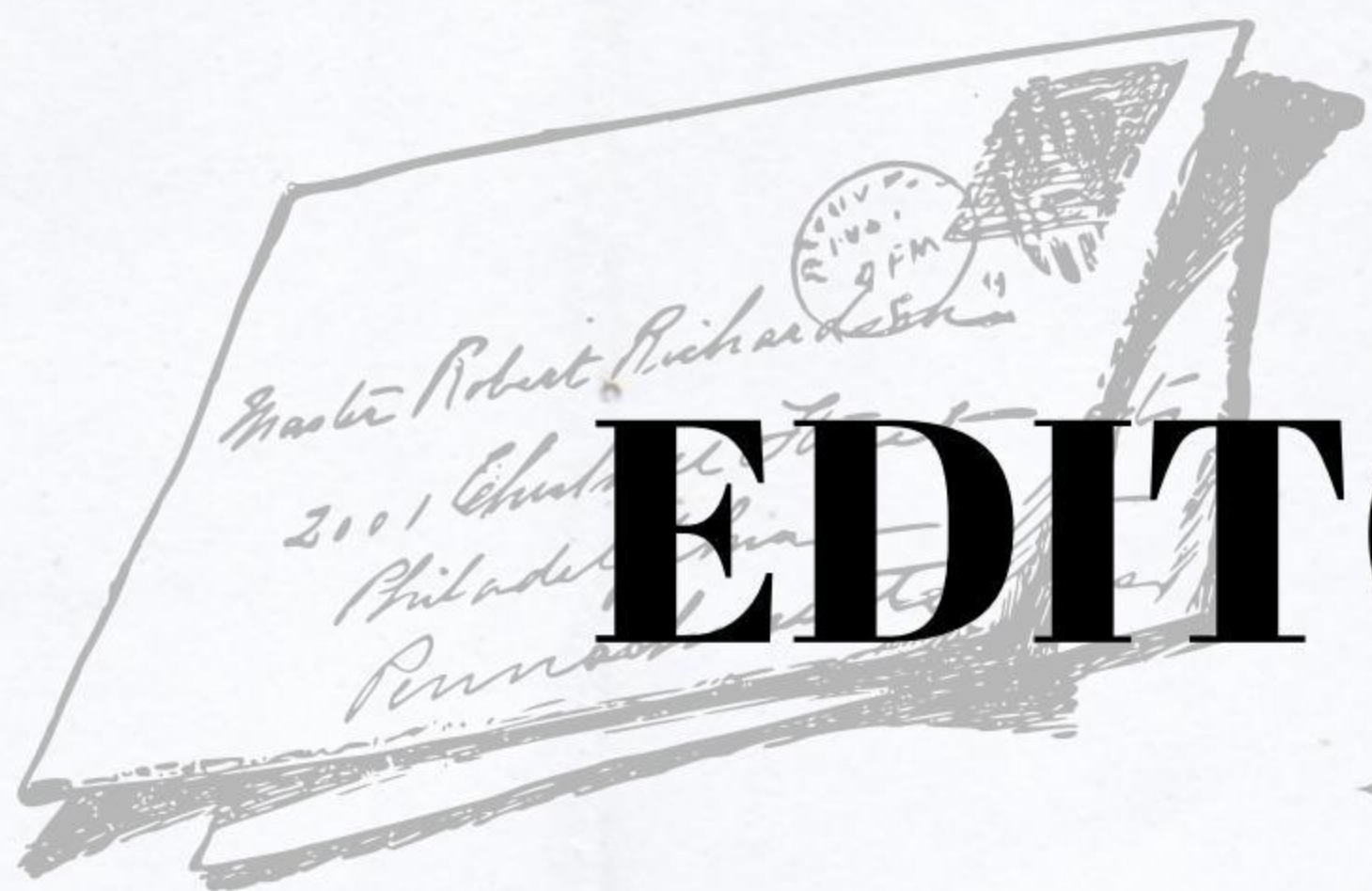


DEAR ME

Letters to Ourselves

The Ridge Annual Magazine
2021/2022





EDITOR'S NOTE

The past year has seen many of us re-evaluate our lives; after a prolonged period of forced contemplation, we've had to face up to the unkind truth that we may not be as content as we believed ourselves to be. With this realisation, we've had to confront ourselves head-on and ask, "What do I really want?"

It's the uncomfortable questions that reap the most insightful answers. And that's what this issue, Dear Me... Letters to Ourselves, is about. In this issue, The Ridge team bravely asks ourselves those difficult questions that plague us in the dead of night and which keep us from sleep. This deeply personal issue takes an explorative look at matters that strike at the core of what it's like to grow up in an increasingly complex, fragmented and polarised world, constantly running a race we have no hope of winning. We don't mean to come across as cynical but rather to hold up a mirror in which you can see the schism between a highly educated and driven generation and the deep insecurities we harbour in a world that runs too fast, and hopefully find some way to bridge this gap.

Dear Me... Letters to Ourselves takes you on a journey through Discovery, Journey, and Growing Up. The first section, Discovery, explores our lifelong desire to 'find ourselves' and to come to some understanding of who we are as individuals. It is an especially imperative process for those of us on the cusp of adulthood, who—perhaps for the first time—are truly awarded with the space to choose for ourselves and the clarity-of-mind to decide what we like and what we do not.

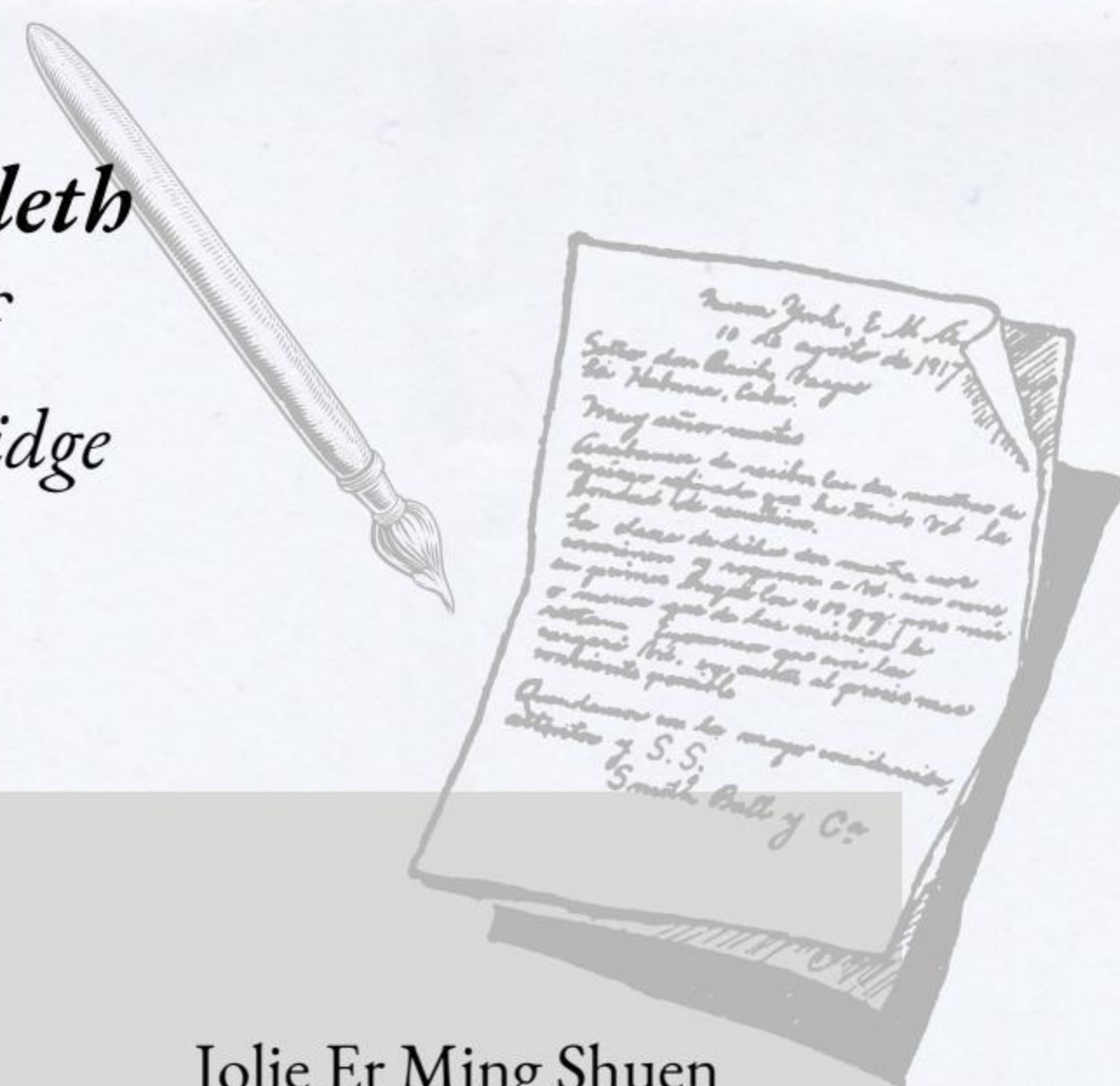
Then the issue will guide you through Journey, a turbulent time of change when our emotions can turn with the tides and so can our friendships, and even our relationship with ourselves.

Finally, we take you through Growing Up, where we come face-to-face with our most pressing concerns to-date: navigating the charted-but-dangerous waters of adulthood and its many norms and contradictions.

This issue asked our writers to look deep within themselves, our editors to question their own viewpoints, and our designers to bring to life a feeling of impermanence and whimsy. It wasn't an easy task, and for their wholehearted commitment and enthusiasm in the making of this magazine, I'd like to thank everyone involved and commend their efforts. This issue would not have been possible without you.

Our team hopes this issue will inspire you to think deeply on yourself and the uncomfortable truths you have uncovered in the last years.

Isha Jose Meleth
Editor-in-Chief
NUSSU The Ridge



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SEARCH FOR AN AESTHETIC.

By Gabrielle Ng

Behold: a wispy white dress billowing in the wind next to a field of daisies. Next door, a Ralph Lauren ensemble fit for an equestrian. Not your taste? Then perhaps a silk robe beside a bubbling bathtub instead, laid alongside a box of Laduree macarons. Welcome to our digital world of aesthetics, or what I like to call the Dressing Room.

In this mystical dressing room that's almost too good to be true (more on that later), we're free to be whoever we want to be and take our pick among a variety of vision boards based on our personalities, moods, and values. There's dark academia for the Dead Poets Society enthusiasts, cottagecore for the urban escapists, old money for those who can no longer keep up with the Kardashians.

What exactly draws us to define ourselves by these pre-designed sets of outfits and backdrops? Simply put, humans have always been drawn to beauty. Just like bees to a flower and swallows to an eclectic feather collection, our enduring attraction towards beauty is innate.

Picturesque landscapes lift our mood and fuel productivity at work, and symmetrical faces strike us as attractive. Especially in a tumultuous time where viruses and wars can change our world at the snap of a finger, there's nothing more enticing than escaping to online fields of flowers and ancient libraries.

The desire to define ourselves by physical traits and appearances, though, may be something more unique to humans. This is not an inherently bad or superficial tendency, despite what more pragmatic societies like Singapore's may tell you. I personally believe in the ability of fashion to be an empowering creative medium for everyone, no matter size, shape, or background. After all, how can we not tie our identities to something we literally wear on our skin? Discovering your favourite silhouettes, colours, and vintage styles can be one of the most exciting parts of coming-of-age.





THIS PROCESS OF DEVELOPING OUR IDENTITIES THROUGH AESTHETICS BECOMES PARTICULARLY EXCITING WHEN WE START GOING BEYOND JUST CLOTHES

Teens discovering their love for alternative rock can find companions in online punk communities if no one else around them likes the same music as they do, and dark academia aficionados can review and exchange reading lists with like-minded bookworms. With how fast information travels through the internet, the diversity of identities available for us to experiment with at our whim and fancy is endless. Being able to try on a different persona as easily as an outfit in a dressing room has to be the teenage dream for adolescents in their formative years with too many thoughts and too little time.

The result of all this? A dazzling kaleidoscope of visual aesthetics that's honestly amazing. Everyone in my parents' old photographs seems to be an endearing token of 90s fashion, but take a snapshot along Orchard Road now and you'd see a fantastic variety of different styles, even within the same social circles. Aesthetics today are more inclusive and expansive than ever before.

But do we really have personal styles, or just individual outfits bought off Instagram advertisements for no particular reason apart from the fear of missing out?

When style becomes as simple as clicking a purchase button online and then throwing your item of choice into the nearest Salvation Army bin once it's no longer trendy, aesthetics start to get ugly. The same ease that allows us to explore boundless possibilities with the tap of a button can ironically enable us to pick and choose prepackaged identities to shoehorn ourselves into—and then completely convert to another one the next day. With 24-hour shipping and TikTok users denigrating sartorial trends deemed in vogue just weeks ago, our purchases are arriving and our social media feeds refreshing faster than we can experience real-life events to shape our identities.

How many subscribers of the cottagecore aesthetic actually reduce their material consumption in line with the anti-capitalist, slow consumption rhetoric that cottage-living advocates? How often are wearers of Vivienne Westwood's viral pearl choker simply millennials with disposable income, instead of followers of the 70s' punk movement Westwood engineered to—in her words—"put a spoke in the system?" When we fail to understand the nuances of aesthetics and forgo substance for style, we let our clothes wear us instead of us wearing them. Clothes turn us into yet another walking advertisement for a widely subscribed aesthetic, or worse, a solely profit-oriented corporation.

Moreover, even though fashion has **taken leaps and bounds towards diversity** in recent years, there is still much room for improvement that aesthetics can hinder.

Take, for example, the old money aesthetic. Rooted in the preppy aesthetic of past decades, the collage of yachts and collared polo shirts is a response to the glitzy Paris Hilton-esque display of wealth that was popularised in the 2000s through trends like logomania. However, elite universities, on which the old money social circle and preppy aesthetic are founded, maintain this elusive exclusivity by awarding special priority to applications from children of alumni and major donors—the vast majority of whom are white, according to the Los Angeles Times.

Certain aesthetics emphasising delicate femininity such as balletcore and cottagecore also have a notable lack of women of colour among their online photo boards, insidiously denying women of colour their femininity just because of their race.

This is less than surprising as aesthetics only mirror the issues plaguing their problematic inspirations: the ballet industry houses a notoriously disproportionate minority of women of colour, so much so that brown skin-toned pointe shoes for women of darker skin tones went into production only some five years ago. Likewise, films like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women* that are often referenced in cottagecore moodboards take place in periods where their white protagonists were likely merrily exploring fields taken from Black and indigenous peoples.

To top it all off, humans aren't the only ones our search for an identity impacts. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, the fashion industry is the second-biggest consumer of water and is responsible for eight to ten percent of global carbon emissions—more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined. Rapidly evolving trends also mean the average consumer buys 60 percent more pieces of clothing than 15 years ago while keeping each item for only half as long. The lifespan of our earth is rapidly being shortened, and all we'll have to show for it are little trinkets we've only worn once for the 'gram.

HOW MANY SUBSCRIBERS OF
THE **COTTAGECORE AESTHETIC**
ACTUALLY REDUCE THEIR
MATERIAL CONSUMPTION?

However, after describing what reads as a real-life horror movie, I hope you'll hear me out when I say aesthetics aren't completely bad. Yes, they may have a long list of ramifications if misappropriated and taken to an extreme, and they can be complicated and confusing, but they don't need to be. They can just be, well, fun. Isn't that what playing dress-up or pretend was about when we were younger? Perhaps there's an inner child in all of us searching for an identity, trying on different styles and beliefs everyday like a mental dressing room, seeking and relishing new discoveries and novel ideas because that's how we grow as people. We can use our interests in aesthetics as a map to our identities instead, finding what resonates with us and what doesn't, and then build our unique styles around that rather than boxing ourselves into one Pinterest board.

Even buying things on a whim because of an Instagram advertisement has nothing inherently wrong with it since e-commerce is honestly going to be our future—as long as you're not making an impulse purchase every single day. If you absolutely must make regular purchases to maintain your sanity as a university student in a pandemic, start taking note of staples and styles you frequent. Subscribing to one style or aesthetic that you've found yourself constantly gravitating towards can help reduce overconsumption too, since every new purchase will complement the pieces you already have and stay in your wardrobe for a long time.

And if one aesthetic is too boring, perhaps explore the different facets of aesthetics that don't necessarily fixate on material desire and consumption, such as reading and learning new languages to play into dark academia, or sewing and baking to pay homage to the cottage lifestyle.

Starting to take inspiration from everywhere around you, not just social media, can help immensely in adding a personal touch to whatever aesthetic you choose. That could be your favourite movies, books, nature, the cool stranger you saw standing at the bus stop, nostalgic memories, architecture, the sunset...by not belittling the ordinary, we can develop our aesthetics in taking a piece of us everywhere we go.

Never mind the good, the bad and the ugly of aesthetics. In an overcrowded world, we can form our identities by weaving the rituals and pauses of our everyday life into our memory, turning the mundane into the magical—and, well, the aesthetic.



WHO ARE YOU?



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS:



THE ADVENTURERS OF NUS

By Timothy Loh

You may have heard Dungeons & Dragons being mentioned before. You might even know friends who've spoken about it, or seen characters in your favourite sitcom play it. You, however, might not be sure what the fuss is all about.

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is a tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG), but you don't need a board or pieces so much as you need imagination. One person is the Game Master—narrator, facilitator, and the one who comes up with the challenges and the enemies players have to fight. The gameplay is done through dice-rolling and description, with a physical board (if you're playing face-to-face) or an online platform (if played virtually) to help you to visualise what's going on. It's a fun group activity, and also a great way to get started with storytelling and roleplaying, even if you're not normally a big fan of games in general. As it happens, I myself play Dungeons & Dragons, as do many other NUS students, and countless others from all walks of life.

But how and why do we play? To answer these questions, I sat down with several players and Game Masters (colloquially known as Dungeon Masters, Unpaid Authors, or the Powers That Be) to see how we could best answer these questions and share about this game we have come to know and love.

Cast of Characters:

Myself, Timothy Loh
Y3 Economics and History

Joshua Seow
Y2 Theatre Studies and Sociology

Square Lee
Y3 Microbiology

Samantha Choo
Y4 Political Science, with Minor in Business



So, first question: what is it like to play D&D?

Samantha Choo: It's a chance for me to be someone else, in the simplest terms. I've always loved fiction, and D&D offers me a chance to play a character inside a fictional fantasy story. Sometimes, that's all you need to know to get started.

Square Lee: It's grown more popular and less weird to get into, and the 5th Edition (5e) of D&D especially is quite accessible and easy to pick up. If you ask me, it's also a way to get to know people. Often, when they create their first characters, intentionally or not, they show an ideal version of themselves. You get to see an aspect of them in life that wouldn't normally be so evident when you see them on the street. Once they have a few games under their belt, they might also use a new character to explore certain character themes and aspects.

Timothy Loh: D&D is traditionally set in a mediaeval fantasy world, but the exact details of the setting can follow one of a number of available settings or be completely invented by the Game Master. The sheer flexibility that comes with the game allows it to be a great story-writing vehicle, especially when you have a great group of players as eager to write a story as they are to play in it.

Joshua Seow: It depends exactly on how the DM and the players—that is, you—run the game.

But overall, I would say it's a game that has the power to connect people and fuel the imagination.

How did you get into Dungeons & Dragons?

SL: I used to read books in secondary school, and one of them was the game guide for Neverwinter Nights (a video game based on early editions of Dungeons & Dragons). Once I realised this was an actual game, something I could play, I wanted to find out more. I began to try my hand at being Game Master with one friend. Once I began studying at a polytechnic, I began to play more actively and discovered the D&D community in Singapore. I do act as Game Master for a group of fun folks, though I usually go as a player. Out of all the communities I know of, the D&D community is the one where I really see people from all walks of life.

I've seen plumbers and doctors and students and lawyers all play at the same table and have a great time, and come to find lasting friendships as they play.

SC: For me, two of my friends recommended D&D to me. I'd heard about it a long time ago, but it was only later that I found out more, and I began to join my friend's campaign—where he was the Game Master. From there, I was hooked.

TL: I was first invited to play it whilst I was staying in the College of Alice & Peter Tan, but I missed the invitation amidst swamps of Economics homework. I began playing online, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I got dragged into it by a bunch of Psychology majors, an NTU Engineering student, and a History major.

JS: I used to live in the United States, as my parents were expatriates. My group of friends and I found out about it and began to play together. You have to understand, we were and are a bunch of theatre kids, and we got into it together for the roleplaying appeal. No pre-written modules or even the core rulebooks—we purely used imagination and a 20-sided dice. From there, we slowly began to actually read up on 5e and how the game was actually supposed to be played. It was almost an accident, but we stumbled into it and it stuck.

We played in that improvisational style for a few weeks, and we did a few one-shots and short campaigns in that style. To sustain it long term, we fell back on the original books; we filled out character sheets and started our first campaign in 2014. And I've been playing ever since.

Why do you – and why do other university students—play?

TL: D&D appeals to the part of us which loved stories when we were kids, the part of us which wanted to imagine stories of our own and then put a cooler version of ourselves inside.

It might not have the same moving visuals as a video game, being played on a board with the imagination, but perhaps it might have even better imagery in the mind's eye than a movie or video game. And, well, you get to do it for free, and with all your friends. To me, that's why people from all walks of life find themselves enjoying it so much, and university students are no exception—especially as a break from academia.

JS: For me, I'm a Theatre Studies major. I enjoy acting and theatre and improvisation, and D&D appeals to that in a massive way. Most of this game is improvisation and the playing of characters—story writing and performance together in real time, as opposed to being characters in a play or video game. And getting to do this with your friends is a way to find out new things about your close friends, theatre kid or no. When someone gets into their specific character, it can show more about people's personalities. It can be stressful to roleplay for the first time—but you also get to do whatever you want, and have fun with it. It appeals to the creative, storytelling element that we might otherwise be missing in more quantitative fields of study and work.

At its best, D&D is a safe space for everyone and a fun way to show others this part of themselves, the unifying experience of an epic quest and adventure without actually getting fried by ancient dragons.



SL: For me, I'm naturally a bit socially awkward. D&D is a way for me to hang out and get to know people without awkward small talk. It helps me to get out of my introversion, and it also helps me to really put my imagination to use, imagining stories and scenarios in a recreational setting.

When you play D&D for four hours with someone, you get to know them pretty well—especially if they're playing their first character. For many people, building connections and getting to know people in a new way is a great reason to play. You get to see people put themselves, in the forms of their characters, in stressful situations, moral dilemmas, and the danger of combat, all in a fun and safe way.

C: The main reason for me is that it's an outlet for stress—and I believe that it offers us an element of control whilst role-playing that often we lack in real life, not to mention often more possibilities and freedoms than we have as regular human beings.

I can't just drop everything to go out and fight dragons, but my character can—and I can explore what it would mean for me as a person to make those choices, to lose close friends, face great danger, and take on epic quests, all from the safety of a board game.

As a whole, the mediaeval fantasy universe is really appealing for many people, but honestly the DM and players can choose from a variety of genres and settings—that freedom is something which appeals to people, to tell their own stories. Most role-playing video games don't offer nearly that level of flexibility, and being able to invest in a story that you yourself write is amazing.

How do you navigate the perception of D&D and fantasy in general being “childish”?

SL: Compared to about a decade ago, this perception has been mellowed by the rise of recent media which features D&D as a hobby. You have the Big Bang Theory, and Stranger Things. Then you have shows like Critical Role and Dimension 20, where people actually stream their D&D games live for viewers to watch. What was once the point of social stigma has even turned into a positive trait for some. Nonetheless, there are still labels of nerdism and geekishness associated with it.

To navigate this, I really just let the other party talk first. I discern if they are calling the hobby childish (or any other names) out of spite, personal agenda, or curiosity hidden behind the need to act “cool.” From then I can determine a course to take. If someone is showing bias because of spite or personal agenda, the need to shame something in order to reinforce their own self-image, then I just shrug and move on.

However, if someone is being honest and sincere, then I would usually point out the educational and functional benefits of games like D&D. As mentioned before, some of those benefits are self-discovery, self-expression, getting to know people, and role-playing. Once I've explained this, those who are curious about it often don't find it childish anymore and might see the value of it, both as entertainment, as a social activity, and also in its possible role in therapy, currently a subject of ongoing research... And then afterwards, I offer to bring them to a game to let them try it for themselves, and get to know them better!

SC: I think it depends on the players. Players can be childish themselves, that's true, and people might take it too seriously. Honestly, though, it's up to one's mindset. I don't care a whole lot about what others think; but honestly, the aspects of roleplay are not dissimilar from what we do in everyday life when we interact with others. The different roles and masks that we play are often a form of roleplay, and D&D offers a great way to do it recreationally with a group of others.

TL: I am who I am. My friends know me as someone whose hobbies and interests might be completely different from most others, and that's fine. Those who are good friends are more than willing to accept me and listen when I share about these interests; those who are my closest will ask more to find out! And that's one of the ways I know who the people I want to spend the rest of my life with are.

JS: Honestly, that's not the kind of perception that I've had to encounter in recent years. For one thing, the people I spend time with most, don't have that mindset. But also, the ultra-nerd perception has slowly been fading as it becomes more acceptable, partly as cultural perception and awareness has been changed. There's curiosity in the hobby, rather than anything judgmental. A lot of the responses I get are, “Oh, I've heard of that! Can you tell me more...?” If I did have to navigate that perception, it's really little different from a board game, like Risk or Monopoly, mixed in with a skit. But this time, you can direct how you want the game to go, and the character you play in the skit is your very own.

The point of it is to encourage you to be creative. What people may be averse to, the part that is ‘childish’, is the element of creativity and imagination—stemming from the notion that giving in to creativity and imagination isn't a good thing, that it is for the immature, childish rather than childlike.



Do you feel the labels of “nerd” and “geek” have come to be something which you have come to consider empowering?

JS: Honestly, yeah. It doesn't carry the same stigma that it used to, the same negative weight. This extends to anime, tabletop games, comic books, and more. Nowadays, people have come to appreciate and respect those interests at the very least—and might themselves have gotten into or be willing to try such interests. It's a largely positive effect that has come from media swinging in favour of these 'nerdy' properties, and from more and more prominent and popular figures having gotten into them.

SL: I don't even look like a nerd or a geek! But if someone does call me one, I've never viewed it as a negative term.

SC: I've never been labelled a nerd or a geek, but honestly, I don't even mind the label. If anything, I don't think it's an insult any more, and I certainly don't take it to be one. Well, people often take it as a fact of your hobbies and who we are.

TL: I love it, because being a nerd doesn't mean you can't be well-rounded, personable, professional in work, or sociable with your friends. It's a description of some of the things I love, not something which means anything detracting.



Do you have any final comments for our readers?

SL: Whatever your interests are, whatever personality you have, there's a kind of adventure and story that is for you, and thus, a way in which D&D can suit you. Be it romance, adventure, war, social issues, horror, morality, D&D can touch on any and all of these if you give it a try, when done with a seasoned storyteller. And those themes can be explored safely in the comfort of a cosy student lounge over snacks and bubble tea.

JS: If you get interested by hearing about it and reading about it, if the idea of playing a new game and telling a story with your friends appeals to you, just try it. You don't have to pay much to get into it—I barely paid anything to get into it. The only thing you need is your imagination. Honestly, the best way is to experience it for yourself—you might find that it's a lifelong hobby for you.

SC: Honestly, give it a try and don't write it off. It's free to try, after all, and with a good DM, it's easy to start. You might find roleplaying daunting if you've never done it before, and be unsure of what the appeal is; I was like that, too. But this is a hobby you might come to love, just as I have.

TL: Some people are born for adventure. Others find adventure thrust upon them.

However, should you find yourself with your nerdy best friends, some dice, and a good DM to guide you, D&D could just be the adventure for you. It certainly has been for us.

By Caitlin Lim

JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

DEAR PAST CAITLIN...

It's been tough, hasn't it? Life hasn't been easy on us the past two years—from having to adapt to Zoom University (or online school), to being confined in our homes. I totally hear and feel you. Here's a hug to those who might have lost a loved one during such unprecedented times, suffered from COVID-19, struggled to find an internship or job opportunity, or lost streams of income. As we all know, COVID-19 has been nothing short of bringing about challenges in many facets of our lives. As such, my heart goes out to everyone who grappled with the pandemic because, I too, faced difficulties during such trying times.

Now, I'm not here to share extensively about the obstacles I faced due to COVID-19 because everyone has their personal struggles; I don't think it's right for me to publicly rant about my issues when everyone else is probably equally frustrated.

You may think that the pandemic has been nothing but negative, but what I'd like to share today are my positives about COVID-19. Wait a minute, did I just string the words positive and COVID-19 in the same sentence? Yes, you got that right. I think it's rare to see the words positive and COVID-19 in the same sentence apart from the phrase "tested positive for COVID-19"—which really highlights how COVID-19 has shaken the lives of many. I don't want to dwell on the negatives of COVID-19 though. Instead, I hope to share with you, my reader, the vital lessons COVID-19 has taught me. I hope that you'll find this article healing in some form.

COVID-19 has taught me to be a more empathetic person. Prior to the pandemic, I was someone who obsessed over perfecting everything within my control. Needless to say, I was certainly a highly stressed and anxious individual. With a thousand and one worries racing through my mind, I hardly had the emotional and mental capacity to listen to others and their problems. I had a tunnel-like vision, where I constantly focused on my issues. Neglecting the people around me and their problems was a byproduct of such a mentality.

The pandemic, however, caused a paradigm shift in my worldview. It forced me to take things slow and to open my mind to societal issues. With societal trends such as rising unemployment, I realised how minute my problems seemed compared to the bigger picture. After taking time to digest the larger problems, I started becoming more empathetic towards others. I recognised that everyone was fighting their own battles in silence and that their problems were no less significant compared to mine. As such, I took active steps to provide a listening ear to the people around me. For instance, I took time out of my day to listen to the academic problems my younger brother faced and tutored him if necessary. I also actively carved time out at night to ask my parents if they were facing any issues. I even reached out to volunteering organisations to tutor underprivileged students to ensure that they could keep up with school work.

Deep down, I know that this realisation would not have happened without the pandemic. The pandemic broadened my perspective on life and how we should pay attention to others around us. I was often obsessing over the rat race of life and the pursuit of perfection—as this seemed to be the trend in today's society.



LESSON 2A: SEEKING COMFORT IN CERTAINTY

However, the pandemic cornered me to reflect on my beliefs daily and to find myself. Thus, as weird as it sounds, the pandemic has taught me such a salient life lesson. Let's be real: living with COVID-19 was really unprecedented. In fact, the idea of a pandemic two years ago seemed improbable.

As someone who greatly values control and certainty, coping with COVID-19 initially was rough. Everything was changing rapidly: from online lessons to the infamous Circuit Breaker. To me, the unpredictable changes felt like everything was spiralling out of my control. Nothing seemed to be stable and certain anymore—which unsettled me greatly. I found myself fretting over almost every online quiz or assignment, and saw myself panicking over the uncertain future. Would I be able to do well in the A-Levels? Would I score well for my prelim exams? The list goes on...

Most of my friends know that I am no stranger to such negative emotions. In fact, I often lament to them about this during recess or toilet breaks. However, with online school, not only did these emotions intensify, but I also found myself having no outlet to release them. I'm not a huge texter; texting my friends about my emotions wasn't a thing. With negative emotions enveloping me daily, it did not take long for me to recognise the impact on my mental health.

This eventually spurred me to seek comfort in certainty and stability through meditation and indulging in shows.

Meditating proved to greatly shape my life, and I'm grateful that meditating comes naturally to me now. Truth be told, the inertia to start meditation was high. Prior to COVID-19, the idea of meditation has always been at the back of my mind. However, the thought of sitting in silence and focusing on my breath for a prolonged period of time seemed unbearable to me. This was especially because many people preached about meditating for 30 minutes to 1 hour daily. Seemingly improbable to start with 30 minutes a day, I decided to attempt shorter sessions of 5 minutes before my day starts and ends. Gradually, I found myself having the patience to sit through fifteen minutes of meditation sessions.

Though I've not made my way to meditate for an hour a day, the short sessions have taught me how to calm my mind and soul. It also taught me about finding strategies that best worked for me. Sure, trendy strategies regarding mental health can be beneficial—but more importantly, finding the strategy that works best for you matters more. Think about it, there's no point forcing yourself to sit through an hour of meditation if you simply can't keep still for that long. Tweaking it to your needs might allow you to reap benefits instead!

Beyond meditation, I sought comfort through watching shows. Rewinding from a stressful day by indulging in a few episodes of shows seemed to do the trick for me. It transported me to another world where COVID-19 did not exist, which provided me with a sense of normalcy. There's no harm in doing that—though I'd advise you to keep reality separated from that!

Lesson 26



Stepping out of my comfort zone

As with most people, I picked up baking during the pandemic since I had time to spare, though I have to admit that I'm quite a greenhorn at it. Despite being a female, I've never once cooked or baked anything. This includes instant noodles and fried eggs. Clearly, claiming that I'm a noob in the kitchen is an understatement. However, the pandemic spurred me to get my hands dirty instead of watching people dirty their hands while baking. With spare time on my hands, I figured that I could give baking a shot since I had little to lose.

As such, I decided to embark on my baking journey. Lo and behold, baking has become one of my hobbies and I now bake on the weekends. In fact, I often bake cookies similar to Famous Amos' to gift to my friends, colleagues and supervisors at work!

COVID-19 has taught me that there's certainly nothing wrong with finding comfort in certainty and staying in your comfort zone. However, branching beyond comfort zones might lead to unexpected outcomes that might reshape your life!

Now that we've reached the end of this piece, I'd like to thank you for making it this far! I certainly hope that this inspires you to step out of your comfort zone to do something you've always wanted to do, or to pursue any passion you have! Who knows, you might discover a new hobby just like me!

Most importantly, stay positive and be kind to yourself, and let yourself wander a little! We are living in a very, very weird time — don't be afraid to seek comfort in certainty, where you engage in activities you once enjoyed; or to step out of your comfort zone to try something new!

Always rooting for you,

Caitlin



The first day of university is often heralded as a dawn to a new chapter in your life— new friends, new CCAs, new academic passions. For others, though, confirming their matriculation meant accepting the rejection from their dream school, or even career. Additionally, a not-insubstantial number of students start second-guessing their major, wavering between soldiering through a major they’ve grown to resent or uprooting everything for the unguaranteed hope of greener pastures.

Whether you were driven by passion, burnout, or rejection, such a major change (pun intended) is no doubt a nerve-wracking experience. I know, as I’ve experienced it myself. While the decision is ultimately up to you, I hope my experience, along with other students, will help those who are considering changing their majors or career paths.

Though I am a FASS student now, I had very little exposure to Humanities and Arts subjects in my pre-university days as I was in the Science stream. My passion for Biology was only rivalled by my utter detestation for Maths. While I’d always struggled with Maths, it went from “a headache” to “literally never came close to passing” as I transitioned from secondary to JC, eventually dragging down my other Science subjects. The rejection letters from various Science faculties were disappointing but not surprising. Resigned to my second choice, I matriculated into FASS.

By Tan Wei Mei

STUDENT'S MAJOR CHANGES



One door closes, many more OPEN.

Needless to say, spending all my pre-university days struggling to pass three failing Science subjects left me very little time to diversify my portfolio or explore other interests. Thus, resume-building was my first priority during my Freshman days, and remains so till this day. Despite my rough start, I picked up a few tips throughout my university days to make career-building and transitioning to university a lot smoother; tips that may just help you:



1

Firstly, always have a backup plan.

No matter how passionate or driven you are about your ‘dream’ career, it never hurts to pick up a few skills and interests unrelated to your desired specialisation. I had certainly learnt this lesson the hard way.

2

Secondly, clichéd as it is, look for opportunities!

If you don’t know what you’re passionate about yet (like me), dabble around and try anything that caters to your strengths or piques your interest. If you realise that it’s not your cup of tea, at least you’ll know what not to pursue in the future—and trust me that’s more helpful than you might think. I found it easier to narrow down possible career paths once I’ve filtered out my dislikes.

3

Thirdly, think through your decisions and don’t rush.

Life-changing matters such as major changes require much thought and preparation. Test out the decision by taking a few modules from the discipline you’re planning on changing to; Ask around to find out if the major or career path really is for you—peers, seniors, professors, career advisors, and even online forums can all offer valuable insights. It is admittedly anxiety-inducing to take the time to explore and decide on what you truly want for your future while your peers are charging towards their goals. However, I personally found that time invaluable as it ensures that I have no regrets regarding my decision a few years down the line, when changing things around would have been far more difficult. Before settling on CNM as my major, I had taken 2K and 3K modules for both English literature and CNM to ensure that I fully experienced what each major had to offer. Despite having a strong passion and aptitude for English literature, I eventually settled on CNM as the skills taught were directly applicable to media-related jobs that interested me.

Of course, my own experiences are far from universal. Major or career changes are highly individualistic decisions. That’s why I’ve asked fellow students and a professor to share their own pieces of advice.

I. Knowing Yourself

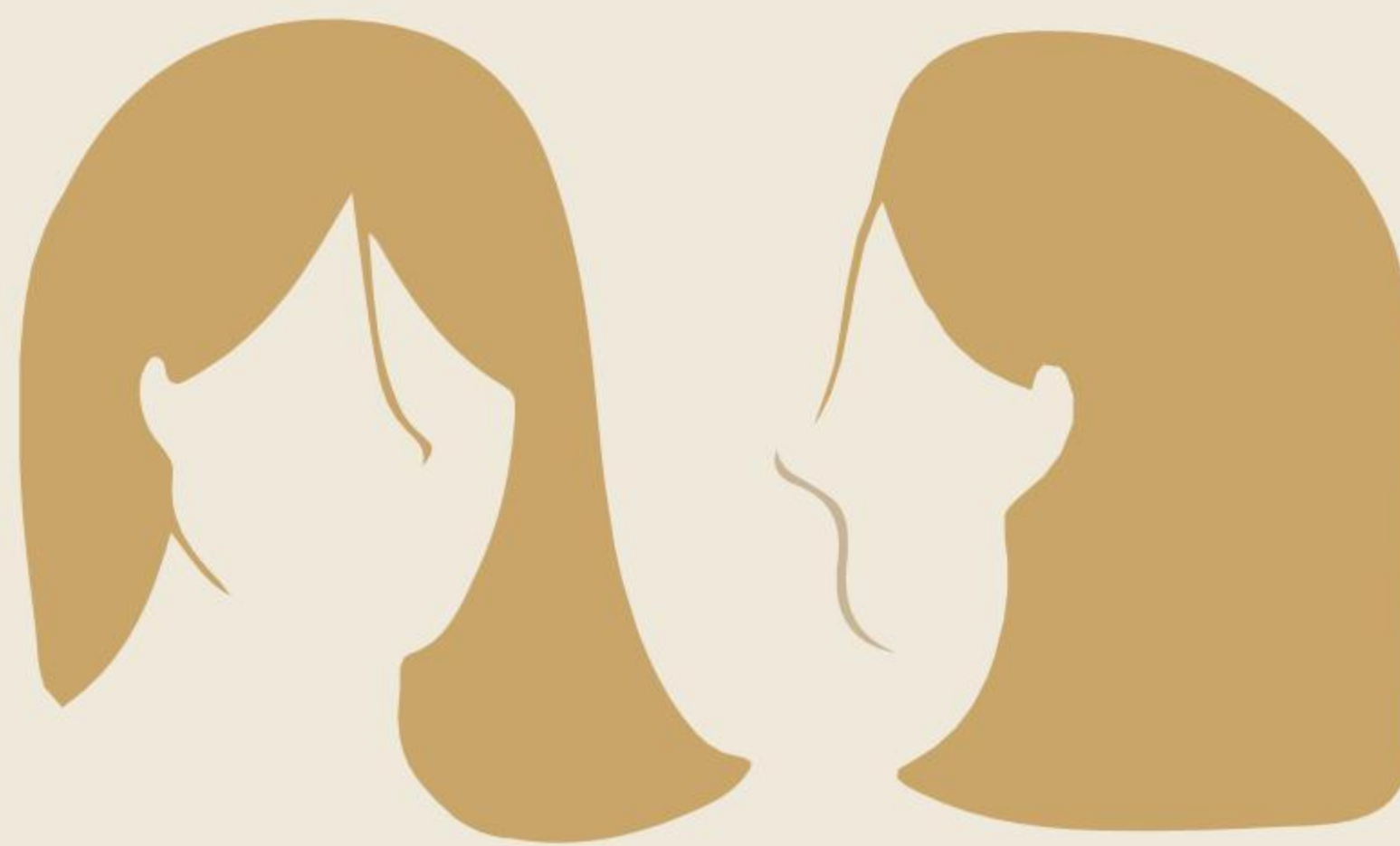
Siow Huan is a Year 2 Sociology major. Though she too was in the Science stream prior to joining FASS, her experience is vastly different from mine.

She initially had reservations about pivoting away from STEM. Many people had cautioned her against it as it would close the doors for future STEM careers. Moreover, she had the additional hurdle of carving her own path as no one in her family had majored in Humanities. However, after taking A-levels, she realised that she did not want to continue studying a subject that she had little interest in. “I eventually decided that continuing my Science education just wasn't for me and took the step to study something that was more suited for me,” she said. Her decision came after a long period of uncertainty and ambiguity. To ensure that she made a well-informed decision, she did much research on Humanities majors and the career paths it would pave the way for. Other than planning ahead, she stresses on

The importance of SELF REFLECTION.

Students should know their strengths and weaknesses, as well as what they are willing to prioritize or sacrifice. For example, choosing a field that you have a weaker aptitude for would require more time and effort, which would, in turn, reduce your flexibility for other opportunities such as CCAs, internships, or part-time work. And don't forget your leisure time either! It's important to factor in not only how many other opportunities you would have time for, but also the downtime you will need to feel well-rested and happy. Keeping your mental and physical limits in mind while taking up commitments is also crucial to prevent burnout.

Challenging your assumptions is another important aspect of self-reflection. Set aside your preconceived notions of majors, such as the stigma regarding arts degree or the prestige associated with Law and Medicine. Instead, critically weigh the pros and cons



of each major that interests you. You should also consider alternative pathways to acquiring the necessary skills, such as online lessons and on-the-job experiences, and evaluate whether they are suitable for your learning style.

“Students should know their strengths and weaknesses, as well as what they are willing to prioritise or sacrifice.”

As so nicely-articulated by Siow Huan, just know that **it is perfectly fine to move at your own pace**. As long as you put in the effort, and learn to spot opportunities and values in the things you are doing, you'll be okay.

II. Passion and Aptitude

Earlier, I mentioned that forums are a good place to connect with others who are stuck in the same boat. I came across Jane on a Reddit thread about changing majors. While I traded a failing high school passion for a discipline that was more suited to my strengths, she chose the exact opposite. Jane was from the Arts stream in JC and was certain she would study Geography in university. However, her conviction wavered after two semesters of university-level Geography. “I became very jaded as it was different from Geography in JC. I felt that the content taught was too theoretical,” she said. To take a break from her writing modules, she decided to enrol in a few technical coding modules, which turned out to be a challenge she greatly enjoyed.

At her subsequent data analytics internship at a startup, her enjoyment of coding blossomed into a passion for data analytics and solution-oriented programming. Upon reflection, she concluded that she no longer had any passion left for Geography or its career prospects. And so, she changed her major to Business Analytics. She also took on multiple internships across a variety of fields, including analytics and business development, to ensure that her decision was rooted in genuine passion and not jumping the bandwagon.

Naturally, the switch from a subject she excelled in to one where her interest was stronger than her natural aptitude was rife with challenges.

— *“I had to constantly remind myself that it is okay to score less than decent so long as I tried my best and learnt something new,”*

she said. Despite the increased difficulty, she had no regrets choosing Data Analytics, nor did she regret the time spent on Humanities as she enjoyed it.

For those in a similar situation as her, she advises them to pursue their passion even if they lack the aptitude, as long as they enjoy it and intend to dedicate the time and effort to improve. She concludes, “my fear of inadequacy and my tendency to stereotype myself as an archetypal Humanities student who is bad at STEM hindered my ability to learn. Once I overcame that barrier and focused on learning to gain knowledge, and not just for the sake of exams, I was able to pick up things much more quickly.”

CS2040
Data Structures
and Algorithms

the design and implementation of fundamental data structures and algorithms. The module covers basic data structures (linked lists, stacks, queues, hash tables, binary heaps, trees, and graphs), searching and sorting algorithms, and basic analysis of algorithms.

III. Additional Advice and Allaying Anxieties

Last but not least, I sat down with Professor Jonathan Sim to discuss his insights into careers and major changes. As the professor for the General Education module GET1050/GEI1001 ‘Computational Reasoning’ and the internship module DMA1401PH ‘Computational Reasoning in the Corporate World,’ he has helped students from all walks of life and disciplines in their university journey. Here’s what he has to say about some of the major concerns students have about changing majors.

One significant concern of many students who are considering changing their major is the *extra school fees*. Personally, I also had similar financial concerns. However, I followed Prof. Jonathan’s advice and calculated the unsubsidised school fees, the interest rate and monthly instalments of student loans, as well as my personal finances. The calculations concretised these intimidating unknowns into useful, actionable information, and made me realise that the financial cost of an extra term was more manageable than I expected.

\$10,032.89

The second major concern students have is the fear of falling behind their peers. This is especially so in a school setting, where most students are in similar stages of their life—studying full-time and still relatively inexperienced with the working world. The structured and linear nature of the university journey makes it easy to draw comparison between peers. Thoughts of inadequacy are not uncommon: “My coursemates are the same age as me, yet I only have one internship while they have three. I’m lagging behind everyone else.” However, such comparisons ultimately mean little once students graduate to the working world, where adults of the same age can be at very different stages of their life. For example, one could be getting a promotion, or starting a family, or returning to graduate school, and so on.

Clichéd as it is, life is not a competition, and—in that sense, no one is really “falling behind,” just merely at a different stage in life. Moreover, every advancement in life has its unseen costs; For every impressive achievement that we see, there are sacrifices made that are not visible to bystanders. Living just to compete with others will just lead to unhappiness when we make sacrifices for achievements that we may not actually want. Instead, we should be living for ourselves, even if our goals are not considered impressive or desirable by others.

career progression is not always linear

Thirdly, students are often worried about ‘wasting’ all the time and effort spent studying and portfolio-building for a discipline that they want to change from. However, nothing is ever truly wasted. Everything that we do in our past and present have value, be it by opening doors to future opportunities or instilling transferable skills that can be adapted to other fields. In fact, some of the most accomplished figures started out in completely different fields. Alfred Hitchcock, the renowned English filmmaker, for example, had a background in engineering which granted him the technical precision he needed to pioneer numerous filming techniques that revolutionised cinematic storytelling.

Changing majors undoubtedly raises many anxieties about future career paths. However, it is important to remember that regardless of your major, coursework often falls short of equipping students with all the skills necessary for the workplace. It is not unusual for students to realise that their major alone does little to help them with their desired career.

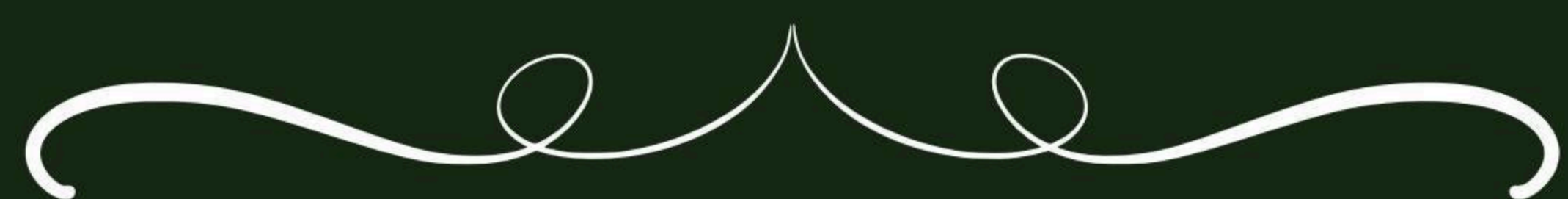
“It is you who make yourself employable. No one can do that for you. It is the soft skills and self-confidence that we build up for ourselves,”

said Prof. Jonathan. Portfolio-building is not just limited to internships; students can start their own blogs to showcase their passions, take up leadership positions in CCAs, organise events in school, and so on.

“To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill,” drawing on his Philosophy background, Prof Jonathan concluded with this quote from Sun Tzu. In the context of career-building, it means to avoid ‘fighting’ with countless competitors in an oversaturated job market, and instead craft one’s own niche in an area with little competition. For example, Prof. Jonathan’s niche is his hybrid background in Arts and Sciences that allows him to understand technical processes and communicate them effectively to the layman—a skill that is underrepresented in the workforce. After all, you can better distinguish yourself from the masses when your specific skill sets are unique and its demand outweighs its supply

Here’s to Change

Hopefully, reading about the different experiences and pieces of advice have helped you with choosing the path ahead. The fabled yellow-brick road leading straight towards our dream job is just that—a fable. Make a wrong turn, take the long route, admire the sunsets and the daybreaks. It’s okay if you’re not sure of your destination yet, but you can always make the long journey ahead worthwhile.



SECTION 2

JOURNEY





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IT'S MEH BUT IT'S THERE: DEALING WITH CREATIVE BLOCKS AS 'CREATIVES'

By Kennice Foo

Time does not stand still. The wretched seconds tick by mercilessly and my deadline draws nearer and nearer. My mind, though, is a pen that refuses to write. Constipation. Can I call myself a writer if I “can’t seem to write” and everything I attempt to churn out is stale and distasteful? Is this “block” that I am going through even a “thing”, or is it a glorified form of procrastination?

Determined to not resolve this on my own, I asked six creatives who are currently undergraduates in NUS how their journeys have been and how they overcome their blocks.

What is a block?

It seems to be different for everyone.

Nadya Low, a 21-year-old Linguistics major who engages in creative work from writing to crocheting and brush calligraphy describes her creative block as losing “interest and momentum in the project and doing it becomes a chore rather than invigorating.” But she also wonders if that “lacklustre energy stems from other factors such as dwelling too long on something and growing impatient, or an overall burnout due to other concurrent stressors.”

Similarly, first-year Law undergraduate, fashion artist and filmmaker Kelly Cheung sees having a creative block as a very real struggle and draws a connection between creativity and energy.



“

“Creativity is the ability to connect different things together, to solve problems and overcome limitations. Art is about the choices you make on how you want to use your technical skills in an artwork to create something new. These technical skills are also consistently trained by practising. When exhausted, it is very difficult to be creative and artistic.”

”

On the other hand, Yuki Koh, a Social Work and Sociology major who also works as a freelance writer and commercial screenwriter, has never been in a creative block before. “I don’t think it’s an end-all-be-all kind of thing, because I’ve never had a moment where I’ve had no ideas. That being said, I’ve had moments where I’ve been more stressed and have had less mental bandwidth to produce more quality work, so I end up producing sub-par work or less satisfactory work for one article. But I also hold myself to relatively high standards, so maybe my sub-par work isn’t really sub-par? I don’t know; as a writer who churns out a minimum of seven articles a month, I’ve come to feel that my writing can become stale sometimes—maybe this is what we think is a ‘mental block.’”

Likewise, Communication and New Media major and freelance photographer Wayne Sing (@wayne.sing on Instagram), 23, sees it through a different lens: “We all have this personal comfort zone of the things we prefer doing, and trying something new often involves getting through this ‘creative block’.”

Chores, Limitations, Comfort Zones



If this block is not going away nor is the deadline, something has to change, ultimately. A mentor of mine once told me, “if something does not work out, change the method.” This seems to be a common thread amongst the creatives.

“I guess it is [the aim] to balance that in a way and put 20 per cent of myself in a project, and if that 20 per cent is blocked then that is fine. I still have the other 80 per cent of me that is still working.” Elizabeth is a CNM major who is currently an intern at TikTok, all the while running two handicraft businesses (@illogicalpins on Instagram).

Other than managing oneself, looking for inspiration also seems to be a common method to escape the mental drought.

For example, Wayne reminisces about the past where he often took photos of his trips overseas to remember those fleeting moments and memories he had (think tranquil and picturesque skylines of Japan and the golden deserts of Dubai). Being unable to travel pushed him to pivot to creating other types of content, such as the neighbourhoods of Singapore right under our noses. “I realised [neighbourhoods] have been outlets of creative inspiration that were right around the corner this whole time.”

“

Looking inwards and paying attention to his surroundings made him realise that “this creative block—or in this case more of a wall—is just the unwillingness to leave the comfort zone of doing something that we are more used to doing. Getting past that wall is the hard part, and there isn’t a one-fit solution to getting past that.”

”

It could come in the form of a change in environment, or talking to someone new, trying out a new experience or visiting a place you've never been to before.

Joel Ng, 23, a Computer Engineering major and artist (@nihil.inherit on Instagram) who does ink illustrations in his spare time, would often have grand ideas for an illustration. "But after 15 minutes of sketching I'd think to myself, 'ew' and then I'd be stuck." He gets out of this state by "making many sketches and relegating them to the karang-guni pile, doing something else, like sleep[ing] or scouring the internet for inspiration."

On another vein, when working on projects with a schedule that needs to be accountable to people other than herself, Nadya finds it hard to deal with those projects besides "powering through [them]it head-on," but that oftens means the work produced is "merely passable" and doesn't excite her perfectionist self.

Hearing from the six creatives in the process of crafting this article affirmed that yes, a block is legitimate, and though these experiences may be personal to each creative, I, too, tread a similar path. Especially since I'm churning out this article while on a block myself. It is an uphill battle for the rational side of me to keep pushing forward all the while my heels are digging into the ground; the other half of myself a demanding critic who refuses to let any word pass. But at the end of the day, I remind myself that although this piece of work may not be my best—I probably won't be parading it around as 'My Best Work'—my work—any of them—is not fully representative of who I am and who I can be. There will be mediocre works and works I am not that proud of, and that is completely normal. Besides, I would like to consider those mediocre works as stepping stones to better ones.

But if anything, I've learned that these creative blocks aren't completely frustrating and futile either.

“

"I've learnt that I work in bursts of energy—the same way I like to ride a bike, sprinting for a minute, then cruising along without pedalling afterwards. But in a society that emphasises consistency and discipline, I struggle to come to terms with the 'lull' period, because it makes me uncomfortable not doing anything," says Nadya.

”



For Joel, creative blocks expose an insecurity of his—being too reliant on references and inspiration from other artists' photographs. "It also bares the reality of how unmotivated I can be, even when it comes to something I love to do, which ultimately pushed me away from art as my profession. Nonetheless, getting over this state of mind and creating art that I am happy with is such a great feeling that it makes all this hassle worthwhile."

Something that Wayne figured out is to actually go in with no expectations to get a specific end result. After all, you can't fulfil expectations if you don't have any to begin with: "If I had gone in with the same expectations of my trips overseas to a place in Singapore, I might not have gotten those unique photos or looked at things from a perspective that isn't conventionally mine."

Facing Ourselves Once More

The final question I posed to each creative was: *what would you say to your past or future self who went through or might go through a difficult time?*

May these answers serve as a reminder to them, but also to you reading this:

This is such a blasé and general statement. At times where your creative drought is wrought down upon you, this phrase can imaginably piss you off, but seriously: Trust the process. Doesn't matter where you start off, just drop one or two ideas in, and trust yourself to follow onto the next idea, and so-on-and-so-forth.

Yuki

*Social Work and Sociology major
Freelance writer and commercial screenwriter*

I think it's also good to explore other passions in life and always be on the lookout for new things or opportunities. I'd rather not brand myself as a "photographer" or a "writer" and instead just take these aspects of craft as part of my journey in expressing myself. It's alright to take a break from your passion to pursue other interests that seem exciting to you, and you're more than what your branding or title defines you [as].

Wayne

*Communications & New Media major
Freelance photographer*

I would tell myself basically that it's ok, it's fine. Even if this internship didn't work out, because it's where I kind of get the block from, it's completely fine, it's not your fault. There's still that 80 per cent of life that you've to go through, you know? Life still goes on in a sense.

Elizabeth

*Communications & New Media major
Handicraft business owner*

I would tell my past self that you will always be very happy, as every day is a better day than yesterday, since you learnt something new. There is always justice as you get repaid what you deserve, and all your hard work is ultimately rewarded even if it may be discouraging in the beginning. I would tell my future self to never forget your purpose when you create art. Never forget how your art is built on the foundation of your relationship with God.

Kelly

*Law Undergraduate
Fashion Artist and Filmmaker*

Yes, it shall pass, but know that it's okay to take a breather, even if it's for a short few hours. If it feels like you've "too many things to do" to take a real break, even switching tasks to a less urgent and important task on the hierarchy of to-dos might be what you need to recalibrate yourself!

Nadya

*Linguistics major
Writer*

Take it easy, and perhaps do something else while waiting for motivation.

Joel

*Computer Engineering major
Artist*

HUMAN CONNECTIONS AMIDST THE PANDEMIC: AN INTROVERT'S REFLECTION

By Daphne Yow

When Covid-19 first hit our shores in Jan 2020, little did we know that it would be the start of a monumental period in history that would change the world forever. Fast forward two years later, previously little-known terms like 'safe distancing' had slowly come into widespread use, while small-scale or virtual social gatherings and mask-wearing have become a mainstay in our everyday lives.

One significant issue that the pandemic has brought about is a reduction in (physical) social interactions to curb the virus spread, and how well we were able to cope with the sudden changes can be very reliant on our personality type—in particular, whether we are more extroverted or introverted.

Extroversion and introversion are terms coined by Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung to describe whether we get our energy from socialising or from recharging alone. Extroverts derive their energy from socialising with other people, while introverts recharge through being alone. And no, introverts are not necessarily shy or reserved; we can have talkative introverts who are socially adept but just have a preference for solitude. Some famous introverts include Bill Gates, Steven Spielberg, Barack Obama, Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosa Parks, and J.K. Rowling.

Going by this logic, it is often perceived that introverts will cope better with the smaller and reduced social gatherings mandated by the pandemic. After all, isn't staying at home in solitude exactly what we are best at? From my personal experience, I would say...actually not really.

My Experience in the Pandemic

I knew years ago that I was introverted when I took the Myers-Briggs personality test, which lets you know your personality type, including your inclination towards introversion or extroversion. And it is true to a certain extent that I seemed to cope better than some of my more extroverted friends, who found staying at home by themselves mentally draining at times as they were unable to go out as often to meet many different groups of friends.

BY THE WAY, THERE IS A SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION FOR THIS—EXTROVERTS HAVE LESS SENSITIVITY TO DOPAMINE, A “FEEL-GOOD” CHEMICAL IN THE BRAIN, AND REQUIRE MORE STIMULATION TO BE ENERGISED! ON THE OTHER HAND, INTROVERTS ARE MORE SENSITIVE TO THE CHEMICAL AND HENCE TOO MUCH OF IT WILL BE DRAINING.

While it felt strange initially to have to stay home more often and not be able to meet as much with others outside of my immediate family, I got comfortable with the situation over time and adapted fairly well. For instance, the reduced number of social gatherings with groups I was less familiar with was okay for me as I will sometimes find it tiring to have to make small talk with people I did not know well, especially after a long day of school or work.



Staying at home more has also given me more chances to enjoy experiences with my parents as I had more time to do common hobbies with them such as baking, home exercises, and watching dramas when otherwise I would be going out with my friends more often. Remember that period of time when baking essentials such as cream cheese were wiped clean off the shelves of supermarkets and baking stores? My mum and I were two of those baking fanatics looking high and low for them, sometimes to no avail! The pandemic has hence made me slow down my life and helped me to appreciate the people and the environment around me a lot more. If not for this time period, I might not have realised that I was always too busy with the other aspects of life—school, work, and friendships.

However, as an introvert, I disagree with the stereotype that a world with reduced social interactions will definitely be an introvert's paradise. For one, it's not that introverts dislike social interaction and want as little of it as possible. As an introvert myself, I am of the view that many introverts do enjoy being around people they know, just that we can be selective about the groups that we choose to hang out with as over-socialising without time for breaks will actually drain our energy.

So when the pandemic took away or lessened the options for social gatherings, that wouldn't be easy for anyone, introverts and extroverts alike (although it is definitely necessary for the short term).

In the context of school and work, both have been largely transformed into online spaces as we have Zoom classes and work-from-home situations.

Having been fortunate enough to have experienced both physical classes and in-person work environments during the pre-pandemic years, I would say I prefer having at least a mix of in-person and virtual meetings with my classmates and colleagues. It is often easier to have conversations in real life than through a screen as there is often a feeling of awkwardness that plagues many Zoom meetings when the people on the line are not familiar with one another. This is especially if it is in a group and only one person can be speaking at any one time so the rest not engaged in the discussion are just there, being unable to also verbally converse with others even if they would like to. To me, there is a certain degree of familiarity that has to be built face-to-face with one another before we are truly comfortable with interacting online.

And on a more serious note, while virtual video call platforms have been a godsend for those separated from their loved ones to still be able to connect with them, there is really only so much that a screen can do, especially when it comes to bigger events, such as life and death.

I lost a loved one to old age last year. During her final days, as myself and most of my family members and relatives stayed by her side—figuratively—through a Zoom screen, that was when I realised how much the pandemic has impacted our way of life. I really wished we could be physically there in the hospital to accompany her, but we couldn't as there was a limit to the number of visitors she could have.

It hit hard. It made me realise how long we haven't had the lively, big family gatherings we used to have pre-pandemic, and how our future gatherings will be so different. Which is why the biggest takeaway I have had from the pandemic is realising the importance of human connections. While I appreciate the good in digital communication that transcends physical boundaries to bring people together, ultimately, seeing through a screen is no replacement for the warmth that face-to-face human interaction brings.

Overall, while the pandemic has been both manageable and tough to bear at times, it has helped me learn to appreciate spending time with family and friends a lot more. The distance has also made me miss social gatherings—which I used to take for granted—more despite my introversion. I have missed the lively conversations, the unrestrained laughter, the company of people I hold close to my heart.

And I'm not alone in thinking this way; in an analysis by BBC article *Why introverts didn't actually 'win' lockdown*, it was found that contrary to popular belief, many introverts were actually extremely relieved at being able to meet people again. This is because the very nature of social isolation during lockdown restricted introverts' usual lifestyles of being free to pick and choose when and how they socialise. After all, "social connections are a basic human need...Being an introvert doesn't mean you don't want to socialise at all."

Hopes for an Introvert-Extrovert Balance in a Post-Pandemic World

The pandemic has been hard on all of us, for obvious reasons. And with the memes that show extroverts struggling to deal with quarantines, lockdowns, or (as we know it) 'circuit breakers' while introverts are "living their best lives" in newfound chances for solitude, the stereotype, while true to a certain extent, does seem oversimplified.

In an article by The Atlantic titled, *The Coming Conflict Between Introverts and Extroverts*, the introvert who was interviewed shared, "I have been slightly sad to see the stereotype that all introverts want quarantine to last forever...I think we all want the pandemic to end and to see one another."

But every cloud has a silver lining, and perhaps this stereotype can also herald a post-pandemic world where we are more understanding of how different people deal with social situations, based on where we fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum.

In the same article, an extrovert shared, "I could imagine a future in which, if I had an introverted friend and they needed to cancel something because they just needed to recharge...it would be totally fine [with me]. I hope that we can...be really explicit with each other about our needs and our boundaries."

A Renewed Perspective on Human Connections

While the pandemic has reduced social interactions, I think it has also made many of us realise the importance of human connections as precious pillars of support and sources of happiness in our lives. Being unable to connect with others as much as before can be tiring in many ways. To that end, it is pertinent that we find our own ways to cope, regardless of where we fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum.

For a start, you can try to focus on quality instead of quantity in social interactions, and you may very well find that quality is better. Take this chance to slow down your pace of life to a more relaxing level, pick up new hobbies like baking or yoga, and do the things you didn't get to do when you were busier.

Looking forward, let's hang in there, take care of our health, cherish those around us more, and hopefully, we will emerge from the pandemic soon with a newfound sense of happiness for what's truly important in our lives.



JOURNALING AND MINDFULNESS

By Amber Tay

There is something intensely intimate about writing in journals. Think about it—penciling down our own thoughts, emotions, and experiences that would normally just live rent-free within our heads; writing for yourself because you want to, rather than writing an academic essay that you have to hand-in by a certain deadline.

Yet, it is also undeniable that numerous companies, YouTubers, and influencers alike have profited from this supposedly cheap and easy hobby, by turning a form of personal expression into an aesthetic that you can snap a photo of before putting it up on your Pinterest or Instagram account.

Thus, amidst the increased popularity of journaling over the past few years and especially after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I couldn't help but wonder if this newfound hype around journaling is just another strategy of the capitalistic society in order to sell more aesthetically-pleasing notebooks (I'm looking at you Typo and Kikki K)... or if there were truly some life-changing benefits to your life.

Journaling and Me

I've been journaling ever since I was 8 years old, though admittedly my reasons for getting such a notebook had nothing to do with the mental health benefits I've heard about online, nor a wish to look back on my childhood memories with fondness and joy.

Instead, my reason was simple: I needed to convince my mother of a reason why I needed to buy the expensive princess notebook that I had been enviously eyeing ever since I saw my BFF flaunt hers in English class.

Nevertheless, under my mother's watchful eyes, you bet that I had to use that notebook to its full potential. From then on, it somehow became a hobby that I would come back to once in a while over the years. Primary school entries were mostly just a way for me to vent my frustrations about minute inconveniences in my day, while secondary school entries were completely dedicated to the weekly school gossip. Yet as I've gotten older, I've noticed that my entries slowly become more about reflecting on my own reactions to the events than the events themselves.

This became especially so when I began my conscious attempts to write in my journal regularly.

Journaling and Mental Health

Scholars have recognized the power of language in both understanding other people as well as ourselves for many generations, where therapy can be seen as the use of verbal

language as a vehicle of

healing. Hence, it's

unsurprising that

the power of both

verbal and written

language has been

studied extensively for

decades. Interestingly

enough, There seem to be more

academic writings researching the

possible correlations between journaling

and mental well-being in recent years.



In a 2005 study that compared the psychological effects of writing versus drawing about a stressful experience, the results indicated that journaling for 15 minutes led to participants having a significantly greater decrease in psychological symptoms compared to those in the drawing or control group. In another study done in 2018, the impact of a 12-week web-based positive affect journaling on the psychological distress and quality of life in general patients with elevated anxiety symptoms was examined. Positive affect journaling, also known as PAJ, is a form of journaling “wherein the participants write about a traumatic experience for approximately 15- to 20-min intervals, often across a period of 3 to 5 days.” Similar to other studies before it, the 2018 study suggests that PAJ resulted in decreased mental distress and increased well-being. For others, regular journalling became a way to notice “a modification of an old understanding” and discover “something that has been present for some time yet beyond immediate awareness” (Stewart & Thomas, 2018). Such an example can be found in Kelly Stewart’s psychoanalysis of her own lived experience of losing her mother to suicide.

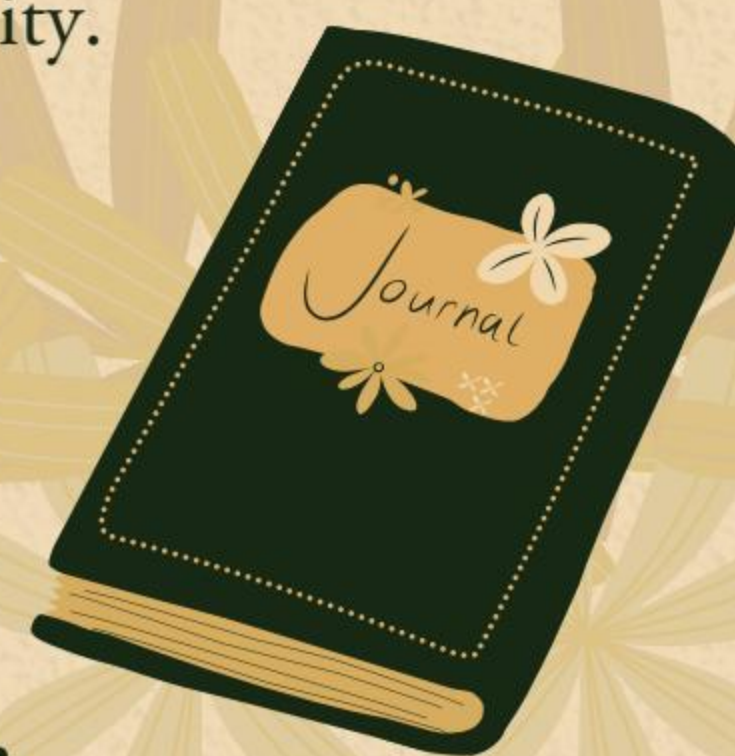
However, daily journaling did allow me to become more aware of the thoughts and emotions I was going through, and take a step back to contemplate the issue at hand with a fresh mindset. Was the situation really as helpless as I thought it was or was I just projecting my fears and anxieties about what may happen? Was the person really trying to deliberately hurt me in the event, or was I so caught up in my anger that I may have missed some specific details?

Oftentimes when I take a step back and reflect on the situation, I notice that my emotions can cause me to hyperanalyse tones and expressions that could be perceived as negative in a certain perspective, when in fact they do not withhold as much meaning as I give them to have.

Our natural anxious response to stress can sometimes become our biggest enemy, if we allow it to dictate too much of our actions and reactions to events. It is something I have to constantly remind myself when I notice myself spiralling once again.

To be frank, I’d dare say it might be an over-exaggeration to claim that journaling is an ultimate cure for intrusive thoughts. Just because one writes their thoughts onto paper does not mean it automatically disappears from your mind forever. Alas, pessimistic thoughts, fears, and anxieties are something that lives and will continue to live inside every single one of us. Thus, instead of constantly beating oneself up over not being “happy enough” or “looking on the bright side,” it is best to see negativity as a part of what makes us humans.

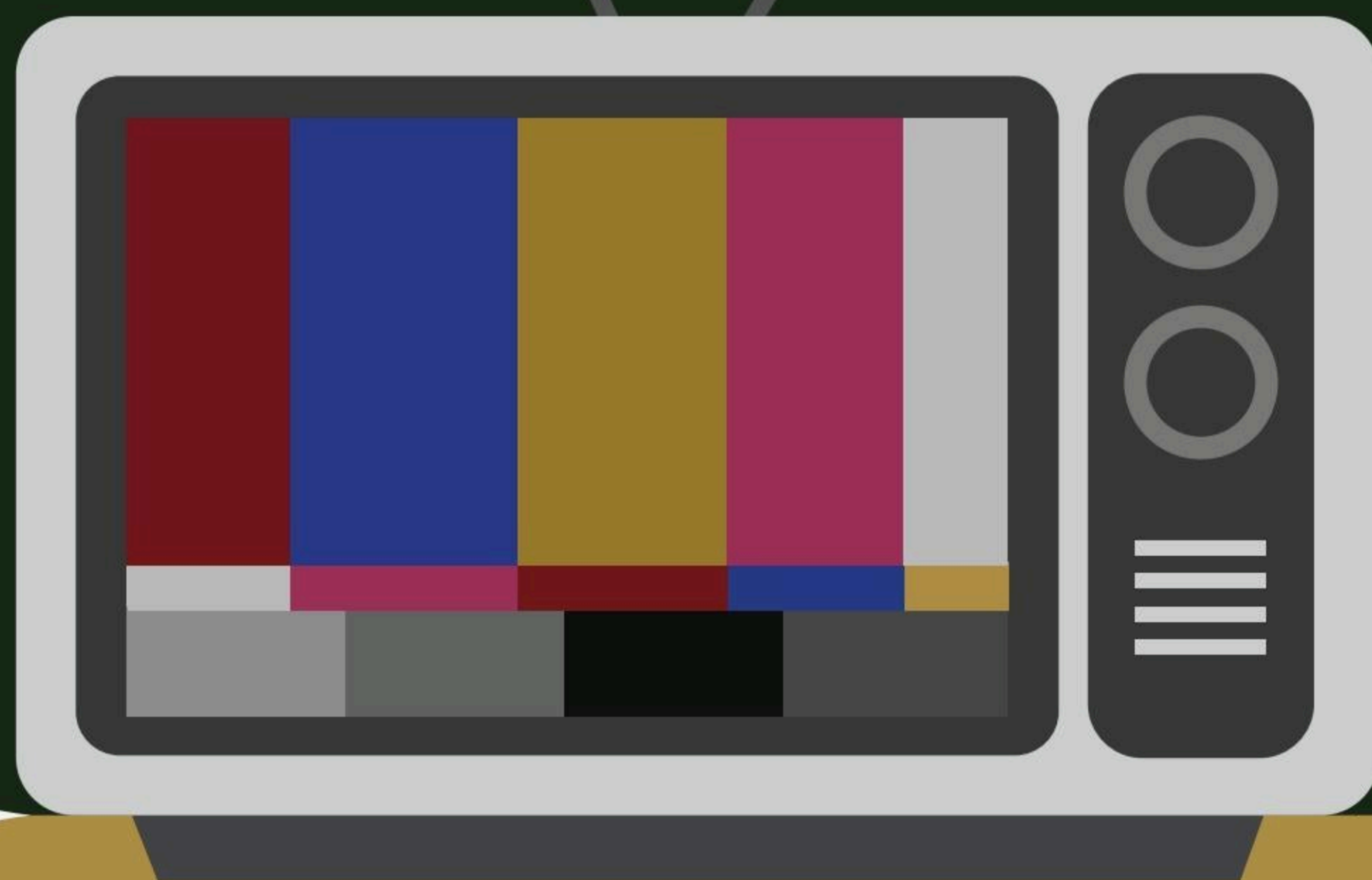
Nevertheless, despite my aforementioned thoughts, it is undeniable that journalling is a cheap and effective form of self-care. By writing down my raw vulnerable thoughts onto paper, it helps give less power to such negative thoughts. It became a form of reassurance: feeling hopeless in a situation did not necessarily mean the situation at hand was hopeless. In doing so, I could assure myself that my thoughts and feelings are not my reality.



Conclusion

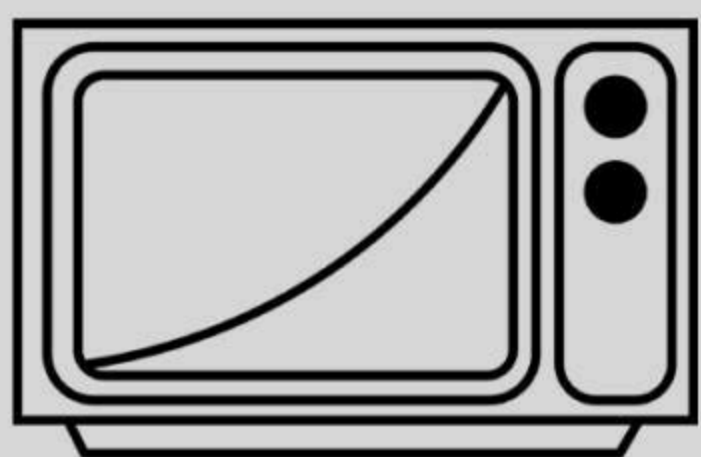
Journalling is a hobby that I’ve been doing for years now, and something I would encourage others to do as well. Though I personally do not feel any drastic changes to the way I process distressing emotions, it is still a useful mindfulness tool that allows me to become more present in my everyday life. Even if you do not really have any interest in mindfulness and mental wellbeing, there is always something fun about noting down memories to remember for your future self.





WHAT SITCOMS TEACH US ABOUT FRIENDSHIPS

by Tan Wan Qin



I'm a huge fan of sitcoms. And judging by the popularity of TV series such as *Friends* and *Brooklyn Nine-nine*, I am not alone.

To quote the ever relatable *Bojack Horseman* from the eponymous Netflix series, the enduring appeal of laugh-out-loud TV lies in the fact that “when you get home from a long day of getting kicked in the urethra, you just want to watch a show about good, likeable people who love each other. No matter what happens, at the end of 30 minutes, everything’s gonna turn out okay.”

An ensemble cast chock full of quirky characters, good-natured jokes thrown in by the handful, and short self-contained episodes each with a satisfying ending. This is the recipe for a compulsively watchable and formulaically perfect sitcom. Whenever I’m sapped of all mental, physical and social energy after a tiring

day of classes, binge-watching sitcoms sound like the perfect way to unwind.

Nestled in the warm cocoon of my pillows and blanket, I often find myself lying still in concentration as I become engrossed in the ludicrous situations the characters are thrown into. Taking in the repartee between characters as they try to navigate the labyrinth of relationships and sticky situations, my face breaks into a grin. My heart feels full with joy. Sitcoms give so much, but ask for so little of its audience. Or do they?

The trap of parasocial relationships

An insidious consequence of binge-watching sitcoms is the false sense of closeness to fictional people. We see ourselves as the seventh member in the *Friends* clique hanging out at Central Perk. We feel like we work at the 99th Precinct alongside Detective Jake Peralta in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. We are one of the townspeople

in Schitt's Creek. By closely following the characters' journey through a multi-season arc and being privy to their thoughts and feelings, we viewers form an emotional attachment to these characters.

In a seminal 1956 paper, sociologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl coined this illusion of face-to-face interactions and intimacy as 'parasocial interactions'. Horton and Wohl acknowledge that parasocial interactions can supplement our regular social interactions to reduce feelings of loneliness (think: our turn towards bingeing TV shows on top of Zoom calls with close friends during Covid-19 lockdowns). However, the sociologists caution against wholly substituting real-life social participation with parasocial relationships.

Aside from TV shows, it is worth noting that parasocial relationships can also take root through the use of social media. How many times do we learn about the upheavals and the minute details of a friend's life through their social media activity rather than straight from the horse's mouth? We see their Instagram stories and think that we know what is going on in their lives. We read their tweets and think that we have unfettered access to their opinions. But this isn't true friendship. Friendship is built on discourse—it involves the sharing and exchanging of ideas, thoughts, and vulnerabilities.

“Parasocial bonds, being one-sided and cannot be reciprocated, are thus the converse of friendships.”

They are no replacement for interactions that nourish us and fulfil our innate desire to connect with others. Compared to the ease of choosing to be immersed in a wonderful fictional universe or passively scroll through our phones, the thought of actively trying to establish and deepening relationships is much more daunting. But the truth is, the most meaningful connections are best forged through a conscious effort to engage with our peers.

Intentionality is king

The phenomenon of a shrinking social circle as we grow older is a widely-acknowledged one. In our early

years, friendships are formed based on 'convenient proximity', often through the common practice of having fixed classes in school. Our consistent exposure to and interactions with a certain bunch of people allows for bonds to form naturally and effortlessly. However, in university, it's a whole different ball game. In the absence of a long-term structure that is conducive for friendships to be forged (save for halls and residences), going through our entire university education without having a single person we can call 'friend' is a real possibility.

What do all sitcoms have in common? Scenarios and settings that conveniently bring many characters into the same space. Think New Girl's housemates-turned-friends situation in a Downtown LA loft. Think the purgatory featured in The Good Place in which all of our beloved characters mingle. Tellingly, these sitcoms end when these characters leave the very physical space that they share to go on to lead their separate lives. It's as if the screenwriters are telling us that the strength of our friendships is almost entirely dependent on physical proximity. Does this mean that we university students are doomed to be incapable of forging relationships that go beyond the label of acquaintances? No, not if you are your own scriptwriter.

Consider this: the fact that we are no longer confined to the strictures of a fixed classroom system means that we are now the masters of our own fate. It also means that we can meet so many more people from all walks of life, thereby opening up to so many more friendship permutations. That said, in



order to harness these opportunities and potentials, we have to be intentional in the way we approach interpersonal relationships. This intentionality could mean putting ourselves out there by initiating conversation with the stranger seated next to us during lectures. It could mean putting in the effort to keep in touch with project group mates (whom you like well enough). Or it could even mean saying yes to every social event that comes our way. For many of us, this approach might seem too daunting and uncomfortable, but I promise you, it'll be worth it in the end.

Learning to let go

Another affordance of the unstructuredness of university life is that we are no longer made to interact with those we find 'toxic'. We can cut loose relationships that do not serve us and our mental health well. Considering the pain that comes with platonic breakups, it is understandable why many of us might not be willing to let go of these toxic relationships. But in the age of self-care and self-improvement, why are we still tormenting ourselves by clinging onto things that no longer serve us? In fact, part of adulting is learning to accept that people come and go.

We'll meet many new people throughout our university life. Some will become the friends we hold dear, while many others will remain at a distance as near-strangers and acquaintances to us, and that's okay. It may be more comforting to think of these transient relationships as small parts of our life story. In the case of sitcoms, in addition to our endearing recurring characters, they often feature a smattering of one-off characters and guest appearances to shake things up. While these characters might only appear in a few episodes, they nonetheless contribute to the narrative arc and the character development of our favourite cast members. Perhaps scriptwriters are onto something—focusing on the joy each relationship brings while it lasts is more beneficial than getting hung up on its fleetingness.

University is a time of exciting change and new experiences, and naturally, also entails some changes to our approach to making friends. This means taking charge in forging new connections and maintaining old ones. It won't be as easy as binge-watching shows, but the outcome will be just as, if not ten-folds more enjoyable. May we all find our own tribe on this campus of 150 hectares and 32,000 students, and write the next exciting chapter of our lives.



By Isha Meleth

EMOTIONAL VULNERABILITY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUTHENTIC SELF

If I had to sum up our generation,
I'd use the words: Optimistic; Nihilistic; Exhausted.

Does this sound confusing, or familiar to you?

If you're confused, you're probably from an older cohort. If you're Gen Z, like me, this is a state of mind you're all too familiar with; it's probably the only one you've known since as far back as your memory stretches. Our generation seems to spend our days constantly shuttling between disappointment at the world around us and a pervasive sense of hopelessness at our future, with a few moments of joy sprinkled in whenever we see an absurd new meme. Really, how else could we be when we're made all too aware of all the terrorist attacks, and the school shootings, the broken justice system, and institutionalised racism and sexism that run rampant in the world? Let's not even start on the impending climate crisis.

But this state of mind
has a much more
personal consequence:
emotional exhaustion.



Feeling Nothing

Gen Z is an enigma (and perhaps every generation before us thought this of themselves too). We seem to survive on the contradictory: while we protest cases of social injustice out on the streets and raise awareness of institutionalised racism on TikTok, God forbid we come across someone sharing a personal experience with these on these same platforms with anything resembling sadness, for this may tempt us to pick them apart and meme-ify them. And let's not get started on talking about our feelings.

You'll get a nonchalant
shrug and a casually-
spoken statement of doom:
"Shag. Sian. What can we do?"

It's strange because we live in a time where empathy and emotional intelligence have never before been so widely well-regarded and desired, and yet our generation's capacity for emotional vulnerability, which is a huge component of empathy, seems to be sucked dry. We indulge in numerous 'real' and honest conversations about the state of politics and the increased polarisation of the world, but ask us to engage in such an open and raw dialogue about ourselves? That's anathema. But why is this so? Why are we so unable to treat ourselves with as much empathy and analytical-thinking as what we apply to such grand situations as the state of the world?

What immediately comes to my mind is the culture of nonchalance that we have carefully cultivated. The new 'cool' is being 'chill.' Caring about something that isn't potentially life-altering is labelled 'dramatic,' 'cringey,' or worse, 'cheugy.' Is this why we make a joke out of everything? Consider the latest memes, for example, and you'll see a hint of irreverence in them.

 **But that doesn't mean we don't care,
we just don't like to be seen like we do.**

Perhaps this has something to do with our older cohort being labelled 'snowflakes' for being 'too sensitive.' Growing up and seeing Millennials be scrutinised for 'oversharing' or for caring too much may have taught us to hold our feelings close to the heart so that we wouldn't fall down the same hole. And the older among us might even have experiences being called 'strawberries,' which comes with the negative connotations of being "easily bruised" and unable to handle difficulties.

But perhaps the most deadly aspect of this new climate is our inability to have raw conversations, and bare our insecurities and burdens to each other, and be received with more than just empty platitudes. Think about it; when you confess your insecurities about your body, how many of your friends or followers reply with respectful acknowledgement of your worries, and not the usual, and automatic, "oh no, you're beautiful!" or "be proud of the way you look!" Are these empty platitudes really meant to help or are they just time-efficient phrases we say to avoid treading deep into possibly stormy waters? I'm all for body positivity, but at which point does this become toxic? Even worse, does this take away from our ability to genuinely connect with someone?

This climate of nonchalance means we now shy away from such tough conversations which would require us to be vulnerable in favour of the easy way out which helps no one. In turn, you start to feel that you must hide away your insecurities, take them out to look at only in the dead of night where no one but yourself will know they exist. This helps everyone else feel assured and happy, right?

But does it help you?



Feeling Raw

Humans crave to be understood. It's a fundamental aspect of human nature to want to communicate deeply with others. We are social creatures, after all. But our longing for a genuine connection goes beyond speaking about the day-to-day, and the gossiping sessions with our friends. We want to find someone with whom we can discuss our ideals and values, and our deepest secrets, and in whom we can confide our fears.

And yet, this desire to be understood conflicts directly with our fear of emotional vulnerability. How can we expect to be understood if we cannot be truthful first?

But I don't believe this is our problem; it's a symptom of the times. First off, we need to stop thinking of our problems as childish in comparison to issues of global politics. It's easy to forget about ourselves when the people of Ukraine are going through such a massive crisis, but that doesn't mean our little problems are not worth our attention and discourse. Though it's easy to think otherwise, no issue is too childish or insignificant to confide, even in a humanitarian crisis. In order to be truthful about ourselves, we need to first give ourselves the opportunity to do so. Without engaging in discussions about ourselves, we will not be able to discover the ridges and smooth curves of our logics.

On the other hand, with constant sharing of personal lives and the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private which social media facilitates, it's only natural that we want to put our best, most glamorous faces into the spotlight. Everything online is curated. Even the food we eat needs to be stylised so it can be Instagram-worthy. In such an age, how are we to be authentic?

Feeling Authentic

It'll be difficult, but I'd say to take a risk. Authenticity cannot be achieved without one person putting down their armour first. According to Brené Brown's Ted Talk on the power of vulnerability, true connection can only be fostered with the aid of emotional vulnerability, and courage is what is most needed to achieve this. We need to have the courage to acknowledge that we are not perfect,

and that we do not need to be perfect to be loved. We do not need to be a size 0, or be academically proficient, or have witty comebacks at our disposal all the time. We're allowed to be sad, to experience moods when we don't feel social, to be selfish, or to put ourselves first.



And once we come face-to-face with our own vulnerabilities and points of insecurity, we can start to connect with other people genuinely and form meaningful and fulfilling relationships.

At least, that's what the research says. It sounds so simple when put down in black and white, doesn't it? I almost got tricked into believing it was just a matter of embracing your own insecurities when I first watched the Ted Talk. But reality proves a lot different. I can't, for the life of me, not shrug off comments that hit a little too close to home with humour, or to mask my insecurities with feigned nonchalance or a well-timed joke. At this point, it's more reflex than conscious thought. It seems like a defeat if I ever acknowledge that something affects me. And with that said, I have to admit that I have no perfect answer here.

✦ It's a work in progress, as am I.

But what I do know is that the few times I've allowed myself to be emotionally vulnerable—often at the most spontaneous 3 a.m chat sessions with my friends—I've gained a much deeper understanding of them and made some surprising discoveries. It was in one such conversation that I found out that one of my friends often feels emotionally exhausted and socially extended. She confided in me that in those times she would just want to hide away in her bedroom and stare at the wall. By God did I have those moods too.

Usually, those moods are ones I would try to hide away under the facade of school stress or sleep deprivation. But that wasn't the whole truth. The whole truth was that those moods would simply creep up on me, and the only way I knew to handle it was to plaster a tired smile on my face and say, "time for school." But I wasn't depressed. It was a strange middle-ground where the lack of a clinical diagnosis meant that those moods weren't 'valid.' But they were to me. And her.

It wasn't a comfortable experience. At least, not in the beginning. Yet, that moment when my friend said, "oh my god, me too!" meant the world to me! It was like being seen and being validated in my fears. It gave me a sign that there are other people who suffer from the same insecurities. And that just made speaking about it so much easier. And the best thing was that, to me, she had never seemed strange or antisocial for having the moods that she did. And that just gives me hope that other people won't find my moods strange either. Now, I'm a little more comfortable with my insecurities (not comfortable enough to detail all of them in a magazine, but you get the idea).

Baring your soul to another can be a scary experience. Nonetheless, from my limited experience, I can promise you it has incredible benefits, be it for yourself and your connection with another.

If you confide in the right person, someone who loves you and who accepts you, it can open up a level of comfort that you may not have thought possible before.





SECTION 3
GROWING UP





Should I Hop On The Rat-Race Express?:
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By Aiken Ong

SHOULD I HOP ON THE RAT-RACE EXPRESS?: COMPETITION TRAPS

rat race • *noun*

A way of life in which people are caught up in a fiercely competitive struggle for wealth or power

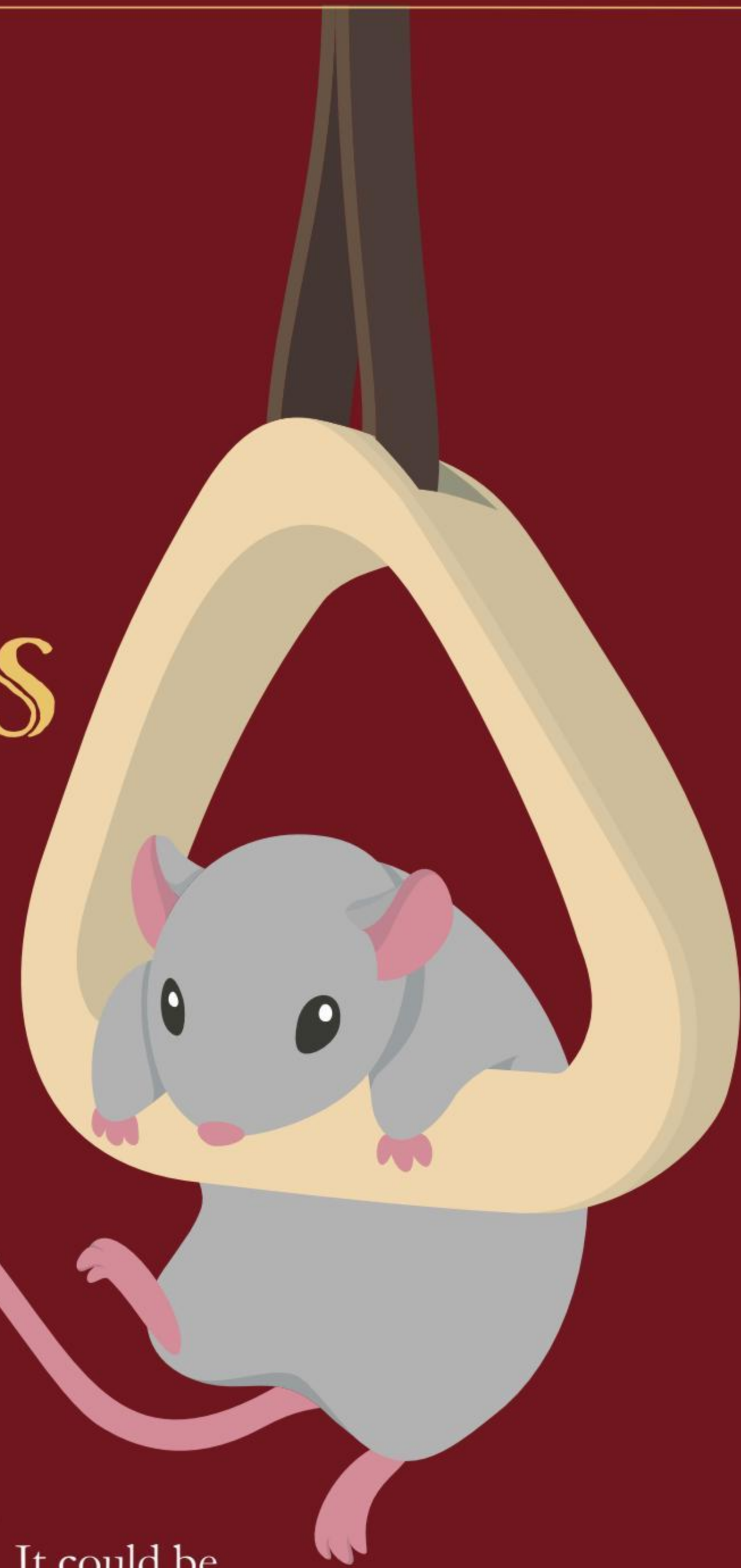
It is my second year at university and I have been seeing the rise in the rat-race mentality among my peers in school. Perhaps it is just the nature of being in the Business school where students are more outwardly competitive. However, I am left rather perplexed by the sudden change in mood and atmosphere around the school. It seems like this feeling is further ramped up nearing the term breaks with the updated LinkedIn posts and Instagram stories of the million-dollar-view from offices in the CBD area. It could be that I am just not used to it, given that I was a rather carefree kid who went through the past twelve years of the pre-defined education system without ever having a concrete idea of what I wanted to do when I grow up.

I feel rather obliged to hop on the *rat-race express* that everyone is on even though it does not seem like it is something that I truly want. Often, it seems that most people find it a desirable trait and a virtue for a person to be chasing something desirable, to be ambitious. This idea of ambition seems perfectly acceptable on the surface but carries along some rather nebulous problems. To me, it seems that the concept of ambition is rather problematic and it calls for everyone to take a closer look at it.

Misguided Motivations

When I was reading the mandatory modules such as GER1000 and GEQ1000, I often hear passing comments such as “This module is so stupid, it’s not even useful,” or “It’s a waste of time to spend time on this since it is a pass/fail mod.” It got me thinking, is it really necessary for us to only be spending our time on things that can pragmatically benefit us?

It seems that ambition creates a tunnel vision for us as we limit ourselves to activities that directly impact our desired careers. Instead of truly enjoying the process of learning new knowledge, making friends, or volunteering, we may find ourselves purely focusing on how they can further beautify our resumes for our next career endeavour.



Toxic Competition

Ambition could potentially promote unhealthy competition. This is especially because most unattainable goals are considered the most ambitious. It is a zero-sum status-seeking game where people are pursuing it for the wrong reasons. For instance, it isn't uncommon to see people trying to one-up their peers and parade their medals for validation.

Take for example the acceptance rate of highly sought after internship positions in bulge bracket banks is less than one per cent. Even in school,

students are subjected to a bell-curve grading system, which pits students against one another.

The majority of bright-eyed individuals striving for such accolades are left with disappointment.

This is especially damaging when people see such competition as survival. Imagine pegging our life-worth to grades or positions that are inherently scarce, where the majority is bound to fail. The competitive nature of ambition creates unnecessary animosity among circles.

Ambition Fashion

Ambition is an arbitrary term. The ambition to excel in certain things is only desired if others desire it too. Simply put, the way we value things is contingent on others.

It is perfectly acceptable and even praised when children spend years of their time and effort practising musical instruments like piano or violin to achieve the highest grading. On the flip side, imagine the responses that a child will receive if they decide to spend all their time perfecting their skills in video games.



This is problematic because what we consider to be ambitious changes with time. For instance, with the e-sports industry becoming increasingly mainstream and lucrative, the goal of becoming a pro-gamer or online streamer does not seem as absurd as before. **What is seen as ambitious is constantly changing.** We should instead focus on what we are interested in rather than chasing stuff that 'ambition' values.

Ambition in a Nutshell

✦ Placing value on 'ambition' lets society decide what's important to us, and encourages us to inherit the desires of others. - Taimur Abdaal

Why should we even care about all of these?

While it seems that it might just be easier to blindly follow pre-defined paths, we can find ourselves falling into the mimetic trap. It is when we stay in these mindless pursuits for too long and become too good at them that it hurts to leave as we find ourselves having nowhere else to go. For instance, students may obviously find themselves in fields that demand highly specific skills, where excelling in them only further exacerbates this trapping effect.

Two questions we can ask ourselves:

- ✦ Do I care about these things because other people around me care about them?
- ✦ Do I actually care about them?

It takes courage to question what success really means to us and to live more intentionally.



TO BE A HUMAN BEING, NOT A HUMAN DOING

by Nadya Low

As university students and young adults on the cusp of adulthood, we are inadvertently exposed to the demands of future worklife, often framed as the search for a purpose or a job. Hustle culture—or the strive for continuous and endless productivity — is normalised in our society where being actively contributing citizens and seeking to fulfil one's individual potential are expected to be ubiquitous and universal goals.



For some of us, we manage to find our *ikigai* (生き甲斐, our *raison d'être*) — the intersection between what we love, what we're good at, what society needs, and what society will pay for. But more often than not, this sweet spot is elusive for many others.

Instead, we end up prioritising some factors like the potential pay acquired and the skills required, over personal fulfilment.

In recent years, the toxicity of hustle culture and the over-prioritisation of productivity have become widely discussed. Overworking and the expectations we place on ourselves to ‘work hard consistently’ have translated into working hard continuously, leaving rest an afterthought, only justified after completing X amount of work.

But how did this mentality come about?

Neoliberalism Beyond the Economy

Originating as an economic concept that believes in the efficiency of the free market, the ideology of neoliberalism came about in the 20th century amidst reform policies that aimed for deregulation and less government intervention, leaving the economy to the private sector and rational, self-interested individuals instead.

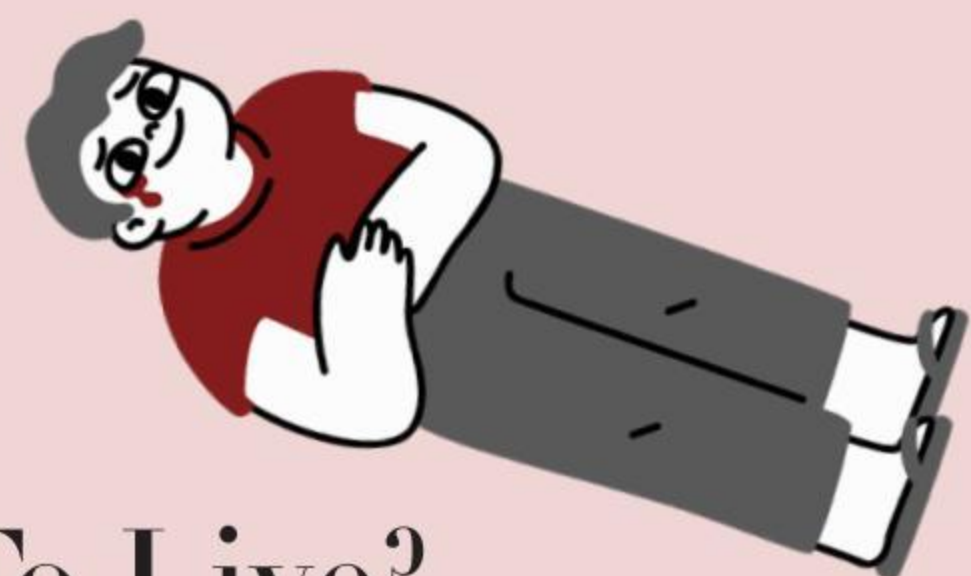
This ideology emphasises individualism and meritocracy, attributes success (and failure) to personal efforts and actions, and positions citizens as consumers and commodities in the market. As a result, we often find ourselves trying to sell our skills and passion on the job market, attempting to furnish resumes with impeccable personal branding that can make us stand out against the competition. Our value as a potential hire is determined by our expertise and what we can do, since jobs exchange money for our time and labour to execute certain tasks. The relationship between employees and employers thus seems transactional at best, and exploitative in less ideal situations (think: low-skilled and lowly paid blue-collar workers, unpaid or underpaid internships). It is widely known that the power differential between employers and migrant workers have led to a slew of problems, and that there has been ongoing debate about the need for more support and protection for low-wage workers, including the recent move to boost their pay in Budget 2022. On the internship front, there is little information on the proportion of student internships that are unpaid, but even among the paid internships, salary ranges can start as low as \$400, and NUS’ guidelines state that employers are recommended to pay

at least S\$1,000 per month for technical roles and at least \$800 per month for other roles.

Live To Work?

After being sold narratives to pursue our dreams and passions throughout our education, the pandemic and the nature of remote working has blurred the boundaries between work and leisure, and has left many young professionals disillusioned by the pervasiveness of work in their lives. This has led to anti-work movements such as the I Don’t Dream of Labour trend on YouTube. Instead of labouring for a company, these creators advocate reclaiming agency through starting their own YouTube channels and having multiple income streams. Instead of working to live, individuals should have the liberty to pursue whatever they want in life based on their larger purpose.

Others have critiqued the movement, as it is led mainly by university-educated professional women with white-collar jobs holding a certain level of privilege, such as Lynette Adkins (who graduated from the University of Texas at Austin, and was a marketing specialist at Amazon Web Services prior to being a self-employed YouTuber), and Katherine Berry, also known as Katherout, (a graduate from the University of Southern California who worked at Adobe). Their critics reveal that the goal of the I Don’t Dream of Labour proponents mirror conventional corporations, where those in power pursue their self-interest by outsourcing the revenue-generating labour. In the case of YouTube, the labour is taken on by viewers and employees of companies that provide sponsorships, thus the notion of empowering individuals who are able to chase their calling or purpose still hinges on the fact that labour continues to be delegated to others.



Or Work To Live?

Separately, the Lying Flat (躺平 tāng píng) movement also features disenfranchised workers who shun conventionally stable factory jobs for more flexible

jobs in the gig economy like being delivery riders. Having lowly paid jobs, these semi-skilled workers decide to live minimalist lives doing ‘nothing’, giving up on being caught up in the chase for a better standard of living that requires greater financial commitments. This includes remaining single and without the liability of a family, working only when needed for daily expenditure, and even refusing to rent or buy property and instead spending time in PC rooms.

Or The In-Between?

For the majority of us, I don’t think either extreme of the spectrum is what we particularly desire. Certainly, it is not work itself (surely some causes out there really do fulfil the ikigai framework?) but unhealthy norms — of relegating personal well-being and mental wellness as less important than measurable economic productivity — that is causing people to want to revolt against and escape from traditional work.

While it is heartening to know that conversations on workplace culture have pivoted to consider work-life balance and harmony more seriously, the realist in me knows that like all social movements, change takes time and a hell lot of effort.



As an undergraduate imminently entering the workforce, I can’t help but ask myself, how do I retain a sense of self as a human being, to avoid being reduced to a human doing things?

What makes us human?

Perhaps it is with a tinge of idealism that I say this, but I think that our humanity comes from being able to develop beautiful cultures that appreciate life beyond working for survival. Historically, civilisations have developed arts and culture in their golden ages, where human aesthetic practices have manifested in domains such as the performing arts and architecture. In fact, wanderlust — where we crave to discover new beauty in unfamiliar places,

has been a recurring theme in this pandemic era, a testament to how human leisure takes its form in the recognition of aesthetics and beauty.

This is not exclusive to novel experiences in new places, though. Simply being present in the moment and acknowledging our emotions as they occur helps us to be more aware of our relationship with our surroundings as we exist within it. I find that it is with this acknowledgement of how tiny and temporary a space we inhabit in the world that puts things in perspective, a reminder that my worldly problems and stressors do not trouble me as much in the grand scheme of things.

Focusing on the self

Rather than boxing today’s youth into some prototypical categories like the strawberry generation—that is, easily bruised and unwilling to work hard, due to not being able to withstand any harsh critique or inevitable failures—I think that it is important to recognise that Gen Z-ers are simply adapting to an ever-changing environment like how our predecessors did.



Gen Z-ers are learning to draw boundaries when the lines are increasingly erased by phone and laptop notifications that can come in at any time, even during what was conventionally understood as rest hours.

The onus becomes on us to distance ourselves from work during after work hours, fighting the fear of missing out on important information, lest we fall into the depths of burnout.

Granted, this does not come easy for many of us who have been driven by fear of failure from young, through the script that any mistake in not getting good grades or good internships can lead us away from getting a good job and living a good life. Who defines what “good” is? For many generations, this might have been the highest paying job you are qualified for, at the expense of your health. Taking into account the previous generation’s mistake of not prioritising health, and the average lifespan getting longer, we need to reevaluate our lifestyles for even longer-term sustainability.

THE MYTH OF PRODUCTIVITY

by Yuki Koh

*I should be doing an internship in the summer.
I need to fill up my seven to nine o'clock slot.
When I watch lecture videos, I can clock it at 1.5x—no, 2x—to
save more time. Come night time, I should stay up until 3am so I can
watch more shows. Cue revenge bedtime procrastination. And the cycle repeats.*

Are you familiar with any of these thoughts and behaviours? I am.

And though I wasn't quite acquainted with this term in my adolescent years, after entering university, I've promptly stumbled onto this rather popular term: Productivity.

Productivity has long been slung around in the steel factories, farmhouses, and rice mills, but that's not the productivity I'm referring to. Modern-day productivity can be defined as a 21st century phenomenon where people are taken by the concept of doing 'anything' at 'anywhere' and 'anytime.' After all, with a limited 24 hours in a day and stifling 7 days in a week, you must always be on-the-ball when it comes to cultivating self-growth and skills. So take on every course and hobby you can find, and make sure you get certification at that! Also, remember to look out for employment and internship opportunities to buff your resume. As for anything else that has no instrumental purpose, out the window it goes. Oh, and take note that a cardinal rule of Productivity is that busyness is the default mode—so if you do need to take a break, it's in service of the long-haul; meaning that you only recharge yourself so you can sustain the long-term 'grind.'

Of course, that was all a gag. But that doesn't mean that people didn't absorb the doctrine like they were cultists who knelt to the God of Productivity—oops, sorry—that was a tad too cynical. I swear I don't hate this term. Nonetheless, with more and more videos populating my feed on 'the productivity grind' and 'productive studying methods,' I am truly sick and exasperated with this term. The fact that it's gripped the world does no favours to the roiling pit of despair in my stomach.

‘Productivity’ is Good

Still, I hold myself back. That’s because like many things, ‘productivity’ is not a one-dimensional, black-and-white concept. If anything, living in a capitalist society means that the majority abide by their predetermined fate of ‘productivity,’ which allows one to measure inputs and outputs, and ensure people remain accountable to their work. Even on a more macro-level, Singapore needs to harness ‘productivity gains,’ for sadly, it is our fate that our only natural resource is human resource. This is also why ‘productivity’ is a viable standard for pruning those who cannot achieve the necessary standards and minimum Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

On a more relatable level, I also depend on some of these study-buddy and ‘productivity’ videos to get through my work, particularly on some sluggish or slow-moving days.

So What is your Issue with This Word?

Yes, there are healthy and beneficial ways of tapping into ‘productivity.’ Lately, however, a large section of students have been so fanatical about ‘productivity’ that it’s started to spiral.

For one, many start to predicate their self-worth on ‘productivity’—and before you wonder about where I’m getting my information from, I confess (once more), that I am a hardcore Reddit lurker. So, most of my material is from r/nus, which is often inundated with posts by students looking for things to fill their schedule with. For most students (like me), a free winter or summer break often brings about inchoate anxieties and frustrations; and if they’re either unable to find proper internships or part-time jobs, they flock to Reddit for ideas. Here and there, kind Redditors offer up suggestions like going through NUS’ TalentConnect portal to seek out internships, or trying one’s hand at NUS’ Edx modules to clock in their Do-Your-Own-Module (DYOM) credits over the winter break.

While this may seem harmless, sometimes these mind-sets can feed into another and compound into insecurities of not having enough to do. At times, it no longer seems normal to take breaks—rest becomes a guilty

indulgence. Comparison also becomes second nature, as in “Why does her resume have 4 internships, while I only have one? Am I a failure for not being able to achieve as much?” For the latter, I call it the LinkedIn phenomenon, where we inevitably compare our achievements with that of our LinkedIn connections and working adults.

But it’s not just those who are free who suffer; The busy bees aren’t doing too well either. I know friends who take on back-to-back-to-back-to-back internships with no breathing space—come holidays, it’s full-time; come the semester, it’s part-time—and who inevitably burnout. Their motivation tapers off until it hits rock bottom. Sometimes, we get so caught up that we forget about the law of diminishing marginal productivity, where past a certain point, our ability to harness our productivity tapers and can no longer elevate.

Interestingly enough, this thought pattern seems to surface a lot more in university and adulthood. Why is that the case?



1. Uncertain Life Paths

Keep in mind that in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions (with the exception of Polytechnics and vocational routes), most pathways are uniform and even. Most of us get up at the wee hours of 5 am to don the same uniforms, follow structured timetables and lunch breaks, have regular CCAs to head for, and a 5-day work-week to follow.

Contrary to these institutions, university breaks out of that prescribed mould. So long as it fits into your schedule and meets your capabilities, you can pick up any amount of CCAs, any amount of modules, and any kind of internship. In turn, it only becomes natural to compare yourself in an institution where people’s lives start becoming highly differentiated. After all, many of us have had our life planned out for us so far, and it’s scary to have no blueprint to follow. While you may hedge these fears by planning ahead for your university and working years, unpredictable factors like COVID-19 may throw a wrench in your plans.

Though some of us try to feed ourselves with false reassurances that we are more than enough and that every individual has a unique life path, it can be hard to genuinely convince ourselves that one is doing enough. So some of us compare (per the LinkedIn phenomenon), and when we do, we see more of what we lack, rather than what we've succeeded in.

These judgements stack, stack, and stack, and compile into a most certain conclusion: I am *not enough*.

2. Macro-Culture and Influences

Another push factor for this mindset is Singapore's pernicious ideals of meritocracy. Over the years, Singaporeans have been socialised into the notion of 'reward for work and work for reward,' and this comes with a shower of Edusave Achievements and Bursaries and high GPA ambitions. Gradually, before one knows it, we become coaxed into subconsciously premising our self-worth off of academic and work-performance indicators. This becomes an insatiable high, where A+ and A grades on transcripts can set the bar higher and higher to no end in sight.

So far, I've commented about 'productivity' in a rather sweeping manner, so I sound rather accusatory saying that—but frankly speaking, I'm referring to my own obsession with productivity as well. Whereas I do derive genuine excitement and joy when learning and committing to new things, I also have been working-cum-studying since Y1, and haven't stopped since; I have swung from Summer internships and placements to part-time and freelance jobs when the semester starts. While I justifiably need the money, a larger part of me fears doing nothing.



Guarding against Insecurities

Ultimately, 'productivity' becomes this grand illusion where one fills their schedule with many, many plans and commitments, all in a hope to plug this gap in our insecurities. After all, if we can kid ourselves into thinking that we're doing enough, then maybe we can genu-

inely believe that we are doing well.

Personally, I have switched gears shortly after entering Year 3. From having back-to-back CCAs and relentless overloading, I jumped ship entirely, and chose to underload in my first semester at 18 MCs. I also backed out from several CCAs. In Semester 2, I also proceeded to underload at 19 MCs and go at my own pace. And what do you know, I felt great!

Perhaps you're wondering why I decided to take it easy on myself. Well, I'm okay with being transparent on this front, and my main reasons are: 1) I'm burnt to a crisp and my mental health took a hit over the summer, and 2) I've decided to finally take action to shear off commitments. Above all, I made the switch because my mind kept drifting to things I've read about, and that:

“Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.”
— Søren Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard is an eighteenth century philosopher who is largely recognized (but would hate to be) as one of the forefront thinkers of existential philosophy and subjectivism. When I was lost and confused, I would often turn to his works to cleave out some meaning in my crisis. Of course, I'm not saying that I fully espouse the entire body of Kierkegaard's philosophies. Unlike him, I still want to get married. But regardless of whether you agree with his works, there remains great value in them.

Indeed, I found that the lull periods of "freedom"—the one that Kierkegaard speaks about—tended to be periods where I felt the most anxious and confused about life. With all this free time, I had an excess of mental energy to ruminate on the meaning of life, my human self, and a bunch of pretentious thoughts.





Over time, dwelling on these became harmful to me, and often plunged me into great anxiety. In response to such feelings, I would focus on being productive to abate such thoughts.

However, being productive doesn't inherently get rid of these feelings. These actions are but a detracted means of false reassurance, of weak validation based on false illusions. And of course, while productivity is not inherently bad and is actually necessary for living, we probably need to learn to accept downtimes as normal parts of living, rather than seeing these as anomalies. Perhaps, then, as a last-ditch contingency measure, we can only mentally prepare ourselves during the good times so that we are able to brave through the less favourable ones. These are, ultimately, the natural ebbs and flows of day-to-day living.

Still, what I've mentioned are all wishy-washy sentiments. What can one really do to re-meet themselves, and be completely okay with resting and having the time and space to simply be?

Counter-Contingencies

I've taken some countermeasures that might be helpful for your own situation. Always remember, though, that everything depends on the individual, so look into yourself and see what really matters.

First of all, I started prioritising my friends and family a lot more. Prior to this, I was already being more attentive to them, but this time, I made deliberate attempts to sit in these moments. Instead of scheduling meet-ups for the sake of ensuring we wouldn't drift, I made it a point to not meet my friends or family until I was in a good headspace. I'm lucky in this regard, as I didn't drift from any friends and family. If you're okay with sharing with your friends on why you can't meet, that might be even better!

Secondly, I started being gentle with myself. I stopped beating myself up for being 'lazy,' and for feeling guilty when I thought I was not doing enough. In that sense, I gave myself plenty of space and time to process thoughts and feelings. This also meant that I avoided negation. Case in point, I tried to phrase things positively, like "I've learnt to be gentle with my feelings of guilt," and not as "I need to stop feeling guilty. I don't understand why I can't get over this." Remember that

there are no right or wrong feelings—they just are.

Thirdly, I scheduled purposeful rest times to break out of the myopic cost-benefits analysis attitude towards life. So far, with the pandemic absolving my need for travel, this also densified my activities, and started to create an issue where I started tallying everything up in terms of sunk costs and opportunity costs. So while I was resting in bed, I'd be plagued by thoughts that I should be engaging in my hobbies—like reading and watching films—to expand my cultural capital. Even while travelling, I'd think that I could be doing something, like reading the news or watching my Netflix shows to maximise my time. But this mindset was terribly unhealthy and detrimental for my mental state, because I started to believe being hectic was the only way I could live. To thus make drastic routine upheavals, rather than wake at 9am, I woke at 10am; rather than plough through 2 books a week, I settled for a leisurely and enjoyable pace; rather than see long walks and exercises as a waste of time, I forced myself to go out and take in the cool night air. Surprisingly, my days have become much more enjoyable. My heart no longer palpitates at a million beats per second, and I look forward to waking up. I also get excited for long walks even when I gain nothing but some exercise from it. Overall, I am much more content and at peace with myself. Life becomes less so of an input-output type of living. Hobbies melt on the tongue. It's slower living, and I encourage you to try it. But that's just some of the solutions I've found.

Look Deeply into Yourself

Productivity is a double-edged sword. While 'productivity' is important for harnessing our skills and buffing up our resumes for future job opportunities and the like, we must always balance this with an understanding that it shouldn't dictate the way we approach life and relationships.

Above all, please be gentle with yourself, and understand that it's not easy to break out of some mindsets that, for most of us, have been ingrained into our heads for more than two decades. To sum it all up:

Just take it easy.



COMING OF AGE AND ADULTHOOD DISILLUSIONMENT

By Ines Pang

Youth is Wasted on the Young

"Make a wish!"

You blow out the candles and open your eyes. Suddenly, you're 21 years old. Your vision swims with the bright-eyed faces of your newfound friends, million-watt smiles split across their flushed cheeks. The hubbub of cheers and conversation sounds muted and far away, and your dorm room is awash in a soft orange glow. You share cake and stories and laughter until five in the morning—time feels slow and languid and sticky. This isn't quite where you envisioned you'd be, but you're young, and you're vaguely happy.

You still don't feel like you understand yourself much more than you did at 18, but maybe it's because you're in such a profound state of transition, stuck in the liminal space of not quite knowing who you are. You've been through a couple of less-than-ideal relationships, lost touch with your childhood best friends, and you're not sure if you're working towards a career that you want anymore. But you'll wake up the next morning with confetti in your hair, and your entire life still lies ahead of you.

It feels as if with every candle blown out, more of your shine is chipped away. And all your blown-out wishes stay boxed away with their silk-bow-tops.



If you Scratch a Cynic, you'll find a Disappointed Idealist

Perhaps you've always taken life in stride with relentless optimism for the future—partly because it was difficult to feel fully content with the status quo (so dull, so ordinary), and romanticising the future was a way to escape the present. But you were so focused on dream-chasing that you didn't realise how much you're going to miss where you are until you've left it behind.



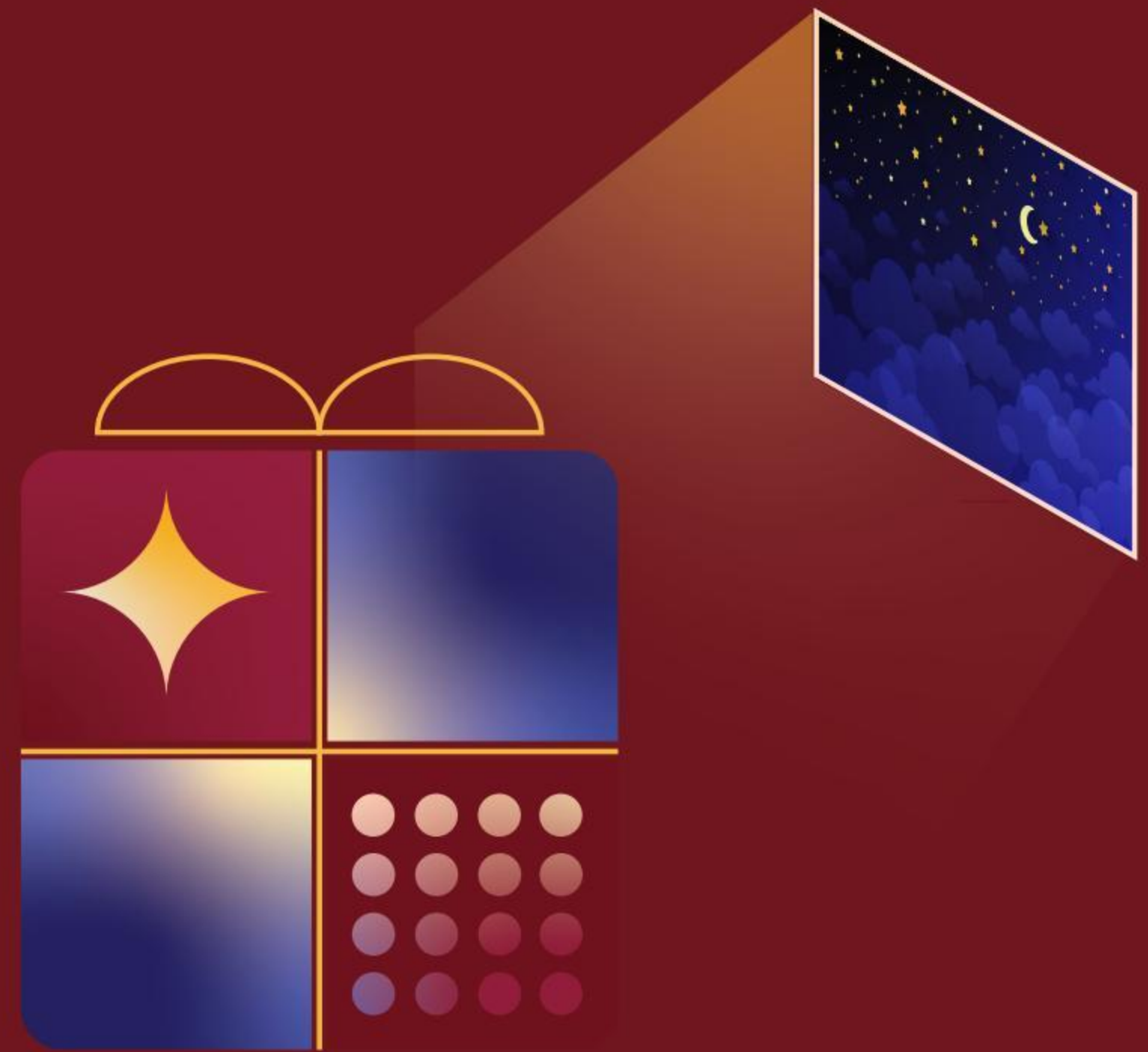
When we're young, our naivety compels us to see the world through rose-tinted glasses. As we grow up, the rosy, obscuring petals fall away, and we're forced to contend with harsh truths that shake the very foundations of our most personal and deeply held beliefs. Maybe you've grown to realise that your dream career isn't sustainable, or you're not as good at something as you've always thought, or a pursuit that has defined your entire life suddenly no longer holds any value.

The transitory years of our youth is also a time of infinite potential. There are inexhaustible possibilities to how our lives might pan out, and it is a blissful summer when we bask in the awareness that our actions and decisions have no "real" consequences. But as summertime comes and goes, perhaps we feel the looming years squeezing us into a terribly small, definite certainty: The longer we plunge on in life, the more difficult it gets to uproot the parts we don't wish to keep.

Losing the Lust for Life

As we get older, time slows to a lull of monotony. Life begins to lose its novelty and lustre... everything feels worn down at the edges, like an old postcard. But at the same time, there persists the disorienting sense that time keeps spinning faster and faster, into a deep, black vortex.

To elucidate why time seems to whizz by faster the older we get, esteemed psychology writer and BBC broadcaster Claudia Hammond introduced a theory of time perception called the 'Holiday Paradox:'



Throughout our adolescence, we live through our most poignant and memorable firsts. As we move into adulthood, our lives become riddled with routine, and every day seems to bleed into the last

Consequently, we look back upon our childhood and adolescent years with a sharper clarity and nostalgic fondness that cannot be replicated, making it seem as though they lasted longer in our subjective 'mind time'—the mildly unsettling concept that the sensation of the passage of time is controlled by our own brains.

“Where is it, this present?” American philosopher William James famously mused. “It has melted in our grasp, fled ‘ere we could touch it, gone in the instant of becoming.”

Right now, the idea of becoming old is pretty far removed from ourselves, but maybe some of us are beginning to feel the effects of this temporal non-linearity. We keep getting older, and there's all these things we should have done by now that we haven't set out to achieve—and what we have achieved, we've found that they haven't made us happy.

How do we continue to be in love with living?

Don't let disillusionment make you bitter.

If you feel disillusioned, it means you've gotten a little bit wiser, and you're no longer trapped in the illusory bliss of living within a safer, more comfortable bubble. It is a stepping stone to propelling yourself towards more personal and emotional growth. We should always strive to change the things within our power that we're dissatisfied with, be it in our own lives or on a wider scale.

Here's a fortune cookie message for you:

“The grass is greener where you water it. Maybe some doors will close, but we can make the most of what we have. It is also important to live life on our own terms and not get swept up by conventional benchmarks of happiness. We're all on the search for something that lights our fires, and the journey itself is a wondrous thing.”

