Crisis, Desire, and "Reality Shifting": How Young Women Imagine Self and Intimacy in Neoliberal Risk Society

by
Sophie Wang

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the Department of Sociology
Vassar College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
April 2022

Advisor: Dr. Catherine Tan

═══*.⋅∴. ☽ ✧ ✦ ✧ ☾ .∴⋅.*═══

I have been getting back into shifting and I think it's because I'm subconsciously yearning for a better people. My family is one of the reasons why I want to shift so much. My mother always makes a big deal about literally so many things and my dad is just straight up abusive. I just got into an argument with my mom and literally why do they wonder why I want to shift? They are... pushing me away from this reality. This reality has so many problems: Global warming; racism; misogyny; colorism; animal cruelty. Honestly I feel like the universe is doing this to push me to do something better for myself... I am tired of Everything here, and the expectations that I'm expected to live up to. I don't want to go to college. I don't want to be in a capitalist society. I don't want to have to feel fearful of the environment rebelling against humans after all the abuse we've done against the earth. I don't want to be in a body that I wasn't supposed to be born in. I'm glad I discovered shifting because now I have an achievable goal that I can do and no longer have to suffer.

– u/earthemberz, 2021

═══*.⋅∴. ☽ ✧ ✦ ✧ ☾ .∴⋅.*═══

═══*.⋅∴. ☽ ✧ ✦ ✧ ☾ .∴⋅.*═══

My parents: Don't you dare get a boyfriend Reva!
Me: Gets a boyfriend in a different reality

– @reeeevamalfoy_, 2021

═══*.⋅∴. ☽ ✧ ✦ ✧ ☾ .∴⋅.*═══

1

•·⋛·° ☽ ☿︎☾·⋜·• CRISIS, DESIRE, AND "REALITY SHIFTING"

In a misty, wooded greenscape, sunlight filters through the foliage onto a single stream hugged by mossy rocks. A hidden nook in a gothic library, with old, dusty books with deep amber and scarlet spines on dark mahogany shelves. A city street in the snow. An urban loft at sunset (floor-to-ceiling windows, exposed brick, a cat sleeping on the floor). A Japanese cityscape from a lush hilltop with a view of the crystalline sea. Winding marble staircases in a cavernous grand hall; children in black cloaks run down the corridors with wands.

This is a *reality shifter's* Pinterest board. Or, to be more accurate, each atmospheric tableau belongs to its own collection, with aesthetic themes ranging from nostalgic, sepia-filtered scenes from the world of *Harry Potter* to the emotive anime characters and vibrant landscapes of *My Hero Academia*, to moody stills of Bella and Edward from *Twilight*. These collages are a tool to better visualize a place the reality shifter wants to go. But this wanderlust is not for this world. To a reality shifter, the realm of fiction is within reach, and it is very much real.

Reality shifting or simply *shifting* denotes a niche phenomenon that exploded in popularity in 2020 and has found a home in a small but significant corner of the internet. Reality shifting might be described as a quasi-spiritual practice in which one detaches their consciousness from their physical body and moves between their current world and any number of desired worlds simply by willing it. The practice is most often grounded in popular culture and media so that the desired reality destination is based on a familiar fictional or fantasy world. In other words, there is a material reality in which Draco Malfoy is a real person. In fact, he is your boyfriend and yes, you can go there.

How has an idea with such far-fetched claims and dubious legitimacy found purchase among a group of people—mostly young women—who have adopted the practice and now claim the identity of "shifter?" It seems that the promises of reality shifting speak to the pressures of the modern world in which young people are growing up. Shifting realities allows escape from a bleak, restricted, or tumultuous life and the creation of a reality completely subject to the shifter's every desire.

BECK AND GIDDENS: THE COMPULSIONS OF INDIVIDUALIZATION UNDER RISK SOCIETY

The sociological underpinnings of reality shifting are best explained by the theories of self and modernity set forth by Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, and Anthony Giddens, who define the cosmopolitan era by individualization succeeding tradition and the rise of society defined by risk. Giddens (1991) proposes that the transformations under high modernity span two poles—from the global to the personal—so that, "for the first time in history, 'self' and 'society' are interrelated in a global milieu" (p. 32).

Risk Society

Both Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) understand modern society as characterized by uncertainty. Global futures and individual futures—and their inevitable enmeshing—are increasingly uncertain. One of the central contributions of Beck's scholarship has been his conceptualization of the contemporary world as a *risk society*, a theory that has been seconded by Giddens who states that "modernity is risk culture" (1991:3). Beck (2014) defines risk as the anticipation of catastrophe, for once risks materialize into catastrophe, in the form of, for instance, a terrorist attack, "risk has already moved elsewhere: to the anticipation of further attacks, inflation, new markets, wars or the restriction of civil liberties." The modern medicine, tools, and luxuries available to some parts of the world as a result of technological innovation and (exploitative) globalized economies also introduces novel risks like pollution, terrorism, and biological or nuclear warfare, as well as risks like pandemic virus that have existed previously but may be created and facilitated by a modern, interconnected society (e.g. the

COVID-19 lab leak hypothesis and the rapid global spread of disease allowed by air travel). Giddens (1991) argues that the modern world is not necessarily inherently more risky than before (e.g. the improved standard of living for most of the world allowed by established medical and sanitary practices), but risk shapes the thinking of actors and establishes itself as a permanent but incalculable presence in contemporary social existence. It still seems reasonable, however, to posit that the scale of risk is increasing from individual or localized misfortune to nearly imponderable global disaster. The unprecedented presence of catastrophe and risk in the collective consciousness can also be attributed to the digitization of journalism that communicates events in real-time (Mythen 2004). While information is chronically accessible, central to the risk society thesis is the incalculability of risk. Giddens (1991) writes: "The dangers posed by global warming are high-consequence risks which collectively we face, but about which precise risk assessment is virtually impossible" (p. 137). Modernity's demand for rationalization is incommensurate with such human-made uncertainties.

How do people live in a risk society? Parallel to the manufacturing of risk in modern society is reflexive modernization, which "disenchants and then dissolves its own taken-for-granted premises," undermining institutions like the nation-state, the welfare state, the legal system, the national economy, and the nuclear family, the typical career and typical life trajectory (Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003:3). The standard markers of adulthood—marriage, homeownership, children—are unachievable or unwanted and must be replaced instead with a continuously remade self (Silva 2013). Even knowledge is brought into question in the wake of scientific discovery, revision, and debate, which "is not only disturbing to philosophers but is existentially troubling for ordinary individuals" (Giddens 1991:21). The existential threat of catastrophe is not mitigated by a sound, stable, and shared worldview when knowledge itself is upended by new discoveries or contested. "At the level of risk perception," Mythen (2004) writes, "advancements in knowledge have failed to result in a more secure social climate" (p. 3).

The detraditionalization associated with late modernity has introduced the increasing ability for individuals to fashion a "life of one's own in a runaway world" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001:45). The disintegration of traditional organizational structures compels individuals to make decisions for themselves. Absent roles prescribed by village, religion, family, etc., the individual becomes the basic unit of social reproduction. *Individualization* means disembedding without re-embedding, and there is an "institutionalized imbalance between the disembedded individual and global problems in a global risk society" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001:21-22). Uncertainty exists between one's independence and interdependence with others, and this tension manifests from the interpersonal to the institutional and from the day-to-day to life-or-death. Individualization, Beck (2014) posits, represents both a constraint and the desire to create one's own biography. With detraditionalization and freedom comes the paradox of choice, and every choice carries unknown and unknowable consequences.

To reiterate, the breakdown of traditional structures and the omnipresent anticipation of catastrophe transforms the living conditions, perceptions, and actions of people living under modernity. In *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992), Beck further reveals how his theses of risk society and individualization are entwined. He asserts: "The system of coordinates in which life and thinking are fastened in industrial modernity—the axes of gender, family and occupation, the belief in science and progress—begins to shake, and a new twilight of opportunities and hazards comes into existence—the contours of the risk society" (p. 15). The contradiction of individualization is that choice takes place within conditions immutable by the individual. While the individual loses traditional commitments and relationships, they exchange them for the constraints and standardizations of capitalist production, consumerism, and commodification (Beck 1992, Giddens 1991). The necessary participation in the education system and the job market (lest one prefers facing "social and material oblivion") is an instance of the compulsions under late modernity (p. 133). The consequences of decisions made within these institutions—or, not decisions at all because they may lack consciousness or

alternatives—will be shouldered by the individual. In addition, the individual must consider risks that by origin and design are outside of individual control. Giddens (1991) predicates that globalization means no one can "opt out" of risk society, and Beck (2014) laments, "we are all trapped in a shared global space of threats—without exit." Despite this—and in line with the neoliberal ideology that governs the global market—there is an individualization of risk that manifests as personal failure and guilt because of perceived choice (Beck 1992). The pressure of individualization is fraught with risk.

In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Giddens similarly outlines how the social and institutional makeup of global modern society permeates even the most personal and intimate aspects of everyday life and self. Reflexive modernization entails reflexivity of self in which lifestyle becomes an open project of individualization. Here, still, "doubt, a pervasive feature of modern critical reason, permeates into everyday life as well as philosophical consciousness, and forms a general existential dimension of the contemporary social world" (p. 3). A key concept that Giddens employs is *ontological security*, a psychological state defined by familiarity and trust, which "protects against a paralysis of the will when facing all the dealings with everyday reality" (p. 3). Beginning in childhood, trust remains crucial in adolescence and adulthood; young people sometimes define insecurity as a lack of trust in others, authorities, the world, and even in themselves (Vornanen 2009). When trust is violated and ontological security crumbles, Giddens explains, waves of anxiety and cognitive and emotional disorientation breach the floodgates of convention and normalcy. Indeed, the frameworks and routines of ontological security make life livable in the face of existential questions of time, space, continuity, and identity and the dangers and fears of a risk society (pp. 37, 44).

Individualization and Risk Society in Gendered Relationships

In Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (2001), their chapter "The Global Chaos of Love: Towards a Cosmopolitan turn in the Sociology of Love and Families" (2014), and Giddens' *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and*

Eroticism in Modern Societies (1992), the theorists specifically take up individualization's effects on intimate relationships and love. Giddens' romantic ideal types allow for the conceptualization of intimacy as the embrace of emotion and interpersonal equality in the face of modernization's obsession with rationality and depersonalized systems. Pivotally, both Beck and Beck-Gernsheim and Giddens consider the changing experiences of women under late modernity in terms of the daily activities, decisions, and power dynamics of an intimate space where tradition and values are contested. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) suggest that individualizing forces disproportionately burden women. For instance, as traditional sexual norms are questioned, the parameters of deviancy and decency of the new sexual values remain "blurred and uncertain" (2001:79). While sexual behavior is newly considered part of healthy development in some circles and became normalized, sexual double standards endure while new contradictions are formed: sexual demands on women increase regardless of their desire for sex. Although women are increasingly liberated from their subordinate position in the home and seek sexual, romantic, and life fulfillment on their own terms, the institution of the nuclear family (on which capitalism rests) lags behind. In this liminal space, women face uncertainty and contradictions in their daily lives and aspirations versus reality (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014).

Neoliberalism and (Sexual) Agency

With the context of reality shifting established with the help of Beck and Giddens, I turn to Jennifer M. Silva's book *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (2013). Silva's interviews with her working-class participants reveal continuous negative encounters with the social and economic structures that shape their material realities. Finding themselves unable to effect change or uncertain how to succeed, they turn their scrutiny inward and explain adulthood and their life experiences through a "therapeutic narrative" symptomatic of neoliberalism's extension "from economic sphere to emotional sphere" (Silva 2013:98). *Coming Up Short* is both a precedent for the current study in investigating how young people deal with uncertainty as well as evidence towards my claim that young women suffer as a result of individualization in the risk society. In

addition, Silva's implication of neoliberal logic in combination with Laina Y. Bay-Cheng's (2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2019) work on neoliberalism and female sexuality provides a theoretical explanation for the ways in which reality shifters' desired realities are normative and not revolutionary.

Across Bay-Cheng's work on young women's sexual agency, she observes that the neoliberal emphasis on individual freedoms—including sexual freedom—obscures the complexity and precarity of women's sexual realities. Like Beck, she notes how this process of individualization purports to empower the individual, yet in focusing on the individual, allows the systemic to go untouched (Bay-Cheng 2015b). Decision-making becomes a compulsion, though women's decisions are still tethered to coercive hierarchies of power and threats of violence, health concerns, and judgment against persistent gender norms. For this reason, Bay-Cheng and others argue, women should not be blamed for behavior that does not subvert hegemonic power. Instead, taking a capabilities approach can make visible the environmental context in which declarative freedoms are (un)able to be realized, determining "whether the external structures and systems of an individual's life are adequate, not whether the individual herself is adequate" (Bay-Cheng 2019:470). Bay-Cheng (2019) elucidates, "women's disparate and embattled access to sexual and reproductive health care represents such a 'simulacrum of choice'" (p. 470). However, Bay-Cheng (2012) posits that notions of empowerment under neoliberalism have been synonymous with "self-interested personal advancement" and a subjective sense of agency and self-efficacy, to the exclusion of solidarity-building and securing influence and resources for collection action (p. 715). She writes, "neoliberalism's brand of sexual agency may be marketed in terms of choice and freedom, but is more likely to foster blame and divisiveness than empowerment and liberation" (2015b:283). Bay-Cheng's findings may be broadened to include life choices and life chances beyond sexuality, for "young women's sexual experiences and decisions are thoroughly and irreversibly entwined with the nonsexual domains of their lives (2019:470). They desire agency in their sexual lives as well as in organizing their social and material realities. Yet despite neoliberalism's very promises of their ability to do so, neoliberal policies construct and constrict the

resources available to young women through the "deregulation of industry and destruction of the welfare state, thus limiting access to adequate housing, transportation, food, health care, education, and other paths to future prosperity and security" (Bay-Cheng and Goodkind 2016:183). When young people struggle to secure resources in a supposed "post-prejudice meritocracy," responsibility can only fall on the individual. "Through this depoliticized and individualized lens," Bay-Cheng and Goodkind write, "social issues are no longer viewed as matters of collective welfare and social justice, but instead are framed by self interest and personal agency" (p. 183). This trend holds true for feminism, which is refashioned into *commercialized feminism* (Goodkind 2009). Like the neoliberal flavor of empowerment previously described, commercialized feminism considers women's liberation in terms of individual success and economic and emotional independence, fostering among young women a culture of personal growth and self-improvement instead of radical, collective justice.

Bay-Cheng's theorization adds an indispensable dimension to this work by considering how the ideological imperatives of neoliberalism influence even the most intimate aspects of life. Considered alongside Silva's (2013) inquiry into the framing of adulthood in the "age of uncertainty," it becomes clear that normative success is constituted by individual striving and the wielding of agency—real or imagined. When young women's ability to do so is increasingly uncertain, jeopardized by major events like a global pandemic, and/or revealed to have always been based more on enduring systems of power and less on individual will, it follows that they might pursue a "life of their own" elsewhere. Namely, a reality in which they wield unbridled agency as individuals and as god-like creators who control other people and the environment of their desired reality. In spite of the limitless possibilities offered by reality shifting, shifters' desired realities tend to recreate normative narratives of self and relationships.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) similarly critique neoliberal economics for its reliance upon the autarkic self and assumption that "individuals alone can master the whole of their lives" (p. 21). The image of the self-sufficient individual is incommensurate, they posit, with everyday experience and sociological studies

that testify to the interdependence of people in work, family, community, and even worldwide networks. This ideology undermines any sense of mutual obligation, both interpersonally and institutionally in the form of social safety nets. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim write that the notion of individualization is "intimately bound up with the question of how individuals can demystify this false image of autarky. *It is not freedom of choice, but insight into the fundamental incompleteness of the self, which is at the core of individual and political freedom in the second modernity*" (p. 21). This statement reveals the competing impulses currently held by young people in this "second modernity." Individualization and neoliberalism compel them to be exceptional, utterly liberated agents, yet they simultaneously desire connection and embeddedness in relationships. Psychology proposes that the need for relatedness—to belong and feel valued—is a basic psychological desire (Ryan and Deci 2000). Some sociologists would link modernity's "larger, impersonal organizations" to the inability to feel this need, citing "the debilitating effects of modern institutions on self-experience" and emotions, leading the individual to feel "bereft and alone in a world in which [they lack] the psychological supports and the sense of security provided by more traditional settings" and small communities (Giddens 1991:34–35). Yet, individualization and the compulsions of neoliberalism isolate individuals and normative success becomes individualistic and divorced from community. These competing compulsions occur in the context of an increasingly uncertain and risky social and material world. In *The Mood of the World*, Bude (2018) agrees that "today's younger generation is growing up in a world of uncertain career prospects, increasing income inequality, global political instability and deepening ecological crisis" (p. 18). Bude conceptualizes mood as a sociologically important concept that reveals itself through effects, not causes, like "problematic biographical circumstances, failed support networks and irresolvable conflicts" (p. 51). Reality shifting allows young people to escape the risk society and achieve both individual, normative success and intimate connections, albeit momentarily and in an ultimately superficial, imagined way.

THE MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY OF REALITY SHIFTING

With sociological theory establishing the social context of the moment, it becomes necessary to interrogate why crisis and desire have manifested in reality shifting. Specifically, why do reality shifters most often turn to established fictional worlds and fictional characters? I turn to media psychology to answer this question and focus on three main concepts: transportation, narrative and nostalgia, and parasocial relationships.

Transportation to Fantasy Worlds

The modern digital media landscape is inundated with the high quantities of high-quality entertainment media like movies, television shows, and video games. The immersive power of this media speaks to the ability of media to transport the audience into the narrative world. Transportation theory (Green and Brock 2000) uses the coin termed by Gerrig (1993) to describe the cognitive and affective involvement of the viewer (or reader, listener, etc.) in the media world and the production of vivid imagery. Gerrig wrote that when a "traveler" is transported by an immersive narrative, "the traveler goes some distance from his or her world of origin, which makes some aspects of the world of origin inaccessible. The traveler returns to the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey" (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004:312). Meant metaphorically, Gerrig's words are an uncanny reflection of the literal aims of reality shifting: leaving the current reality for a desired reality. Transportation and enjoyment are empirically correlated and transportation is a psychologically desirable state (Green, Brock, and Kaufman 2004). It follows that imaginative media like *Harry Potter*, *My Hero Academia*, *Twilight*, and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* are popular desired realities. The audience, drawn in by charismatic protagonists and immersed in a unique narrative world where wizards/vampires/superheroes are fixtures, are, in Gerrig's words, "likely to lose track of the fact that they can't really participate" (p. 313). Reality shifting, then, is transportation fashioned literally. Confronted with the limitations of their current reality, reality shifting promises true participation in favorite media and long-awaited reciprocation from previously one-sided devotion.

Narrative and Nostalgia

The importance of narrative cannot be understated because reality shifting most often entails the shifter crafting their own narrative within a preexisting media narrative. In contradistinction from reality, narratives are straightforward and reliable in terms of good and evil and action and consequence. Narratives of popular media, especially, are certain because they are already familiar to the audience and are contained to their canon. In the predictable narrative arc, conflict or evil is most often defeated and is therefore manageable. On the other hand, the rise of risk society leads Giddens (1991) to write that "the more calamitous the hazards… the less we have any real experience of what we risk: for if things 'go wrong,' it is already too late" (p. 122). The unfamiliarity of modernity is juxtaposed with the familiarity of beloved media worlds. Reality shifting allows shifters to insert themselves into the latter narrative, revise the narrative as needed to tailor the details to their individual desires, and ultimately cultivate a sense of comfort and security. Psychologists Silver and Slater (2019) report that priming thoughts of death led to greater engagement and enjoyment of narrative content, suggesting that stories help audiences cope with existentially dreadful reality, as is an ever-present concern in the risk society.

Many of the popular fantasy worlds that become shifters' desired realities are nostalgic, not least because they were released earlier in the shifters' life (e.g. the Harry Potter franchise, beginning with the first book in 1997 and the final movie in 2011). In addition, many media narratives tend to have the characteristics of a nostalgic event, including providing an existential function by imparting meaning to life in the form of, often, good and evil. This may be particularly important considering the existential threat of the risk society. Indeed, seeking nostalgic media during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the subject of investigation: Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt (2021) measured stress and fear of isolation during early quarantine in relation to nostalgic media use and found that fear of isolation and escapist motivations were positively correlated with nostalgic media use. In "To Nostalgize: Mixing Memory with Affect and Desire," Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, Arndt, Hepper, and Zhou (2015) propose three fundamental functions of nostalgia that may translate to nostalgic media, as

evidenced by Wulf et al. (2021). First, a self-oriented function enhances self-knowledge and identity formation through nostalgic narratives that position the self as the main character in positive events or moments of redemption (Sedikides et al. 2015:210). Nostalgic narratives have also been shown to include themes of agency, competence, success, and power, which can be proxies to self-esteem (p. 210). Reality shifting allows shifters to insert themselves into nostalgic media narratives literally as the "main character" and wield control over every event. The second function of nostalgia is existential. Nostalgic narratives "[buffer] existential threat by providing meaning in one's life" (Wulf et al. 2021:3). Sedikides et al. (2015) note that many real-life nostalgic moments are momentous life events, or "cultural-life-script events" (p. 217). Sedikides et al. include in these events "educational accomplishments (e.g., achieving good grades, graduating), personal milestones (e.g., getting a job, living alone), and relational goals (e.g., getting married, having children)" (p. 217). However, with the breakdown of preordained roles and traditions (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001) and the normative markers of adulthood made tenuous or unattainable (Silva 2013), these goals become sources of anxiety. Shifters may find that the narratives of media worlds are more stable and tangible, and thus enjoy the existential function of nostalgia by proxy. They may also recall recent memories of being a child and being sheltered from the world's uncertainties. The third and final proposed function of nostalgia is social. Nostalgia has been shown to evoke feelings of trust, social support, and being connected to and loved and protected by others (Sedikides et al. 2015:203). This harkens back to the psychological need for relatedness previously discussed, which I argue is heightened by the pandemic in addition to the processes of individualization. Silva (2013) reports that the young people in her sample "express anxiety over the fragility of commitment, yearning nostalgically for the lifelong marriages of the past" (p. 59). Can one get the feelings of connectedness they desire from imagined events and people? Imagined relationships are explored further in the following paragraph on parasocial relationships.

Parasocial Relationships

The desire for connection figures centrally in reality shifters' desired realities, often in intimate relationships with fictional characters. Parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl 1956) are imagined, one-sided relationships with a celebrity or media figure in which one invests emotional energy. A *comfort character*, the term for one's favorite character with whom they feel deeply connected, epitomizes parasocial relationships. They inspire tender feelings, be it platonic, romantic, sexual, or otherwise. First outlined by Horton and Wohl in 1956, parasocial interactions are the encounters between performer and spectator (via radio, television, film, etc.) that feel like real, face-to-face interactions in the spectator's psyche. Continued interactions may foster a parasocial relationship that, while ultimately unrequited, contains elements of a "real" friendship, such as investments of emotion, time, and energy. Horton and Wohl add that parasocial relationships can also be romantic and/or sexual. The connections here will be given more attention later in regard to gendered sexual expectations and empowerment. Romantic parasocial relationships create a context in which love and affection from fictional characters or idealized personae is unconditional. Reality shifting allows this affection to be realized physically and reciprocally.

The psychological motivations for narrative engagement as explained by theories of transportation, nostalgia, and parasocial relationships illuminate the case of reality shifting. However, what does psychology reveal about the effects of such emotional media engagement? Early theories proposed that media engagement was an escape from the economic, social, or emotional stressors of everyday life, and thus an escape from self (Silver and Slater 2019). More recent theories understand it to aid in self-expansion and self-concept as people "explore mediated environments as a means of satisfying unmet intrinsic needs and possibly better understanding their own human condition," and their abilities and attributes (Silver and Slater 2019:3495; Isberner et al. 2019:577). Reality shifting seems to embody both motivations because it offers respite from one's own life by offering an alternative reality of limitless possibility in which the external limitations on selfhood and

success are eliminated. Reality shifting's less-metaphysical, more-male cousins are interactive media like World of Warcraft and other live-action role-playing (LARP) or massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) that have been used to develop a conceptual framework of *active escapism* that is affirming and empowering through projective fantasy (role-playing) and presence (immersion into the mediated reality) (Kuo, Lutz, and Hiler 2016). Reality shifters can role-play an ideal self as well as role-play a relationship with a favorite character. The process of idealization and the imagined interactions that constitute parasocial relationships is an active practice, and the objective media is mediated and morphed by the viewer's subjectivities and shaped to their needs and desires. The power to control intimacy and outcomes is important to young people who are disempowered to do so in real life, as a result of interactions between their identity (e.g. age, gender) and social structures. Giddens (1991) also considers this very utility of media narratives in *Self and Modern Society*. He muses, "Soap operas, and other forms of media entertainment too, are escapes—substitutes for real satisfactions unobtainable in normal social conditions" (p. 199). Here he endorses a main argument of the current study: in engaging with preexisting media narratives and creating their own, reality shifters fulfill desires in their desired reality that are unobtained, uncertain, or risky in their current reality. Giddens continues: "Yet perhaps more important is the very narrative form they offer, suggesting models for the construction of narratives of the self" (p. 199). Compelled by individualization and neoliberalism, shifters use shifting to realize selfhood, even if it is technically imagined or in another reality. While Silva's (2013) young participants react to a similar social and material context as reality shifters, they turn their focus inward and use the therapeutic language of the mood economy to construct selfhood in terms of emotional and psychic development. For them, the "therapeutic self has become a crucial cultural resource for ascribing meaning and order to one's life amid the flux and uncertainty of a flexible economy and post-traditional social world" (p. 19). However, the young women in the current study consider themselves able to effect change in their environment by shifting to a desired reality where their emotional *and* material needs are met. As will be investigated closely in the final chapter, romantic

relationships are one of the central features of many desired realities. In the *Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), Giddens points out that "the rise of romantic love more or less coincided with the emergence of the novel: the connection was one of newly discovered narrative form" (p. 40). Entertainment media has long idealized romantic love and its narrative arcs. At the same time, it overwhelmingly follows a heteronormative script that promotes sexual double standards that lead to shame and judgment for women (Kim et al. 2007). Reality shifting allows young women to seek romantic and sexual relationships on their own terms and without risk.

LITERATURE REVIEW: YOUNG PEOPLE FACING UNCERTAINTY

What appears to be the first academic exploration of reality shifting was published during the writing of this investigation. Somer, Cardeña, Catelan, and Soffer-Dudek (2021) describe shifting as an "emergent online daydreaming culture" and seek to outline its phenomenological characteristics for the first time. They take a clinical psychological approach and compare shifting to dissociation, immersive and maladaptive daydreaming, and lucid dreaming. The current study takes a more sociological approach in order to consider the social context in which reality shifting has emerged.

The question of how young people respond to uncertain futures has previously been investigated by Vornanen, Törrönen, and Niemelä (2009), Silva (2013), and Furlong (2008), who all invoke Beck's risk society thesis. Vornanen et al. (2009) analyzed open-ended responses written by Finns aged 13–17 who were asked to define "insecurity." The researchers gleaned from the responses 16 themes that were then further divided into three main "circles:" the inner circle of insecurity related to self (emotions, experiences), the social circle of insecurity related to relationships, and the outer circle of insecurity related to external realities (institutions, the future) (p. 408). An illustrative response of experiences of precarity from Vornanen et al.'s participants is one male participant's answer: "You can't hold on to anything permanent, everything changes and life just goes on" (p. 408). Gender differences in their findings were that girls more often than boys related insecurity with low

self-esteem or with loneliness and lack of social support. Worries about relationships (and external realities) are captured in two female participants' explanations of insecurity, writing "You don't belong anywhere, you experience constant fear and feel that nobody needs you" and "You cannot put your head on anybody's shoulder and cry over the evils of the world" (pp. 408, 411). Ultimately, Vornanen et al. found that the definitions of insecurity provided by the participants held an "individualized interpretation of insecurity" that reflects Beck's individualization thesis and his risk society thesis (p. 414). Concerned about selfhood and self in relation to society, the young people described insecurity as threats to feelings and abilities (inner circle), close relationships (social circle), and social support, resources, and environment (outer circle).

Silva (2013) investigates how young working-class people view their uncertain futures as traditional markers of adulthood prove elusive in the risk society. Highly relevant to the current study is Silva's finding that while neoliberalism both compels and constrains her participants' life choices through neoliberal policy, it also shapes their subsequent narratives of self. While Silva focuses on economic class, the current study considers gender as a pivotal factor shaping the allure of reality shifting and its practice. I connect neoliberalism to commercialized feminism to explain the behavior of the young female shifters (Bay-Cheng and Goodkind 2016; Goodkind 2009).

Comparable to the current case study in its unusualness is a related phenomenon that has been recognized within the past two decades and received academic attention, particularly as a potential psychological disorder: the self-imposed isolation of the *hikikomori* (hikikomori refers both to the condition and to the affected individuals; the condition is also known as "acute social withdrawal"). The hikikomori are young people who retract from school, work, and social relationships and stay in their homes for an excess of six months (Furlong 2008) . Though reported in other societies, hikikomori was first described in Japan and most work about hikikomori centers on Japan (Stip et al. 2016). Furlong's (2008) exploration of hikikomori questions the purely psychological explanations for withdrawal, instead considering the social context, including changing

opportunity structures for Japanese youth and potentially other youth populations. However, the population is difficult to study by their isolated nature and the shame surrounding the condition. Furlong considers Beck's individualization theory and Giddens' concept of ontological security as potentially linked to hikikomori. The rapid transformation of the Japanese labor market resulted in restructuring that emphasized flexibility and eroded security and predictability. Similar to Silva's (2013) work on the fading markers of adulthood, Furlong reports that such "individualisation of transitions made it difficult for young people to identify points of reference" (p. 318). Further, the lack of state support meant that responsibility fell solely to the individual and their family. Furlong also points to the high pressure and thus high risk Japanese education system as a potential stressor. In addition to similar risk factors in the context of reality shifting, the COVID-19 pandemic may be viewed as prompting involuntary social withdrawal. As the hikikomori spend most of their time on the Internet (Stip et al. 2016), preoccupation with and a preference for media worlds becomes another potential point of comparison between reality shifting and hikikomori. However, a key distinction from reality shifting is that most reported cases of Hikikomori are male (Stip et al. 2016).

The Current Study

The current investigation broadly asks, what can a phenomenon like reality shifting tell us about the current conditions under which young women are growing up? I argue that a shifter's desired reality is one in which shifters can (1) individualize without risk and (2) have emotional relationships while maintaining full control as neoliberal agents. The data reveal that beyond its sensational, metaphysical claims, the practice of reality shifting and shifters' scripts reveal the very real desires and preoccupations of its practitioners, including success, safety, romance, and sex. These desires are in reaction to their current realities, which are defined by crisis and by competing and contradictory compulsions and impulsions: to construct a "life of one's own" but shoulder the risk of choice, to become a liberated agent, to be free from patriarchal gender roles, and yet to be embedded in relationships and communities and satisfy the need for belongingness. The resulting crisis of

uncertainty is compounded by the crisis of pandemic and other material dangers. Desire, too, refers both to general desires as well as in the sense of romantic desire or sexual desire. Despite the implausible and bizarre nature of reality shifting, it is imperative we investigate it in order to understand young women's reactions to crisis and desire for their futures, and especially to locate where we might intervene to increase their safety, well-being, and opportunities.

The approach I take to reality shifting in this study is inspired by uses and gratifications theory (Blumler and Katz 1974), which proposes that people seek out and engage with certain media that fulfills particular intrinsic needs or desires. In accordance with Kuo et al.'s active escapism model, uses and gratifications research understands media audiences to be active and not passive in their consumption of entertainment. To explore the motivations of reality shifters, I gathered posts about reality shifting from Reddit (via posts on the most prominent reality shifting subreddit) and TikTok (via videos tagged under the most popular reality shifting hashtags) for a total of 600 posts/videos. A content analysis was then performed to reveal recurring themes.

The research questions guiding this study are: (1) How do reality shifters establish the epistemology of reality shifting? Then, (2) How do reality shifters understand shifting's ontological claims? Next, (3) How do reality shifters conceive of desired realities and what does this reveal about crisis and desire around selfhood? Lastly, (4) How do reality shifters use shifting in relation to relationships—and specifically romantic and/or sexual relationships—and what does this reveal about crisis and desire around intimacy and sexuality? The current study analyzes online reality shifting content in order to address these questions as well as to offer a preliminary exploration into the phenomenon of reality shifting.

2 •·⦂·∘ ☽ �⦇∘·⦂·• BACKGROUND: REALITY SHIFTING DURING COVID-19

From obscure origins on Reddit circa 2015, reality shifting enjoyed a resurgence fueled by the meteorically popular TikTok app in 2020. This new attention found new audiences compelled by the promises of reality shifting, though not without ridicule from naysayers who read the outlandish claims as pseudoscience. Uninterested in defending their belief in reality shifting, online communities have formed in pursuit of the practice in the corners of platforms like Reddit, TikTok, Instagram, Amino, and YouTube, drawing audiences and devotees overwhelmingly composed of teenage girls and young women.

Reality shifters consistently invoke multiverse theory in the little time and energy they dedicate to designating reality shifting as scientific and "real." Shifters understand multiverse theory to mean that there are infinite parallel realities, a premise from which they propose that one can jump in between these realities and enter a reality of their own design. Given that this concept is fringe and has no scientific basis, the epistemology of reality shifting is effectively democratized. The terminology, methods, and (sometimes contested) tenets of reality shifting seem to be constructed and added to by average people who together create the knowledge of reality shifting as a practice. Importantly, the community lacks leaders or hierarchies outside of experience, where "experienced shifters" will impart tips and motivation to "baby shifters." The community is marked by a supportive do-it-yourself ethos, encouraging anyone interested in shifting to find a shifting method that works best for them in order to reach the joy and fulfillment promised by their desired reality.

A quick foray into a reality shifting hashtag or forum reveals a few key terms that encapsulate the practice. Barring some discrepancies between individual shifters, the following descriptions of the principles and

mechanics of reality shifting are broadly accepted. First, people exist in their *current reality*. People can leave

their current reality for a *desired reality*, where they can spend time before returning to their original reality.

Though I will refer to these two realities as "current reality" and "desired reality" for clarity, the terms are

popularly shortened to "CR" and "DR" and will appear in their shortened form in most of the data. Shifters can

decide a time ratio for the amount of time that elapses in their desired reality and the amount of time that elapses

in their current reality; for instance, one day in the desired reality can be equivalent to only one hour in the

current reality. This allows the shifter to perhaps take potions class with Hermoine Granger, go on a date with

Fred Weasley, and catch a quidditch game while, in the shifter's original reality, they are in math class. While the

shifter is in their desired reality, they are replaced by a *clone* who acts just like the shifter in order to complete all

of their life activities in the meantime. Conveniently, memories can be transferred between the shifter and their

clone.

In a reality shifter's desired reality, every aspect is subject to their control. Many people choose to *script*

their DR, which is to outline the locations, events, characters, and details of their desired reality beforehand so

that they can experience their script once they arrive. This includes their appearance, skills, and relationships. An

overarching motivation to shift is to physically spend time with your *comfort character*, which, as previously

defined, is a character with which one holds a deep affective relationship and may also be attracted to

romantically. Scripting relationships with the characters allows the shifter to become a central character and

become embedded in the social network of the media universe in a way that they have heretofore only imagined.

Further, scripting their own characteristics and abilities allows them to embody an ideal self. Reality shifters are

encouraged to script in a way that works for them, including typing out scripts in their phone's notes app or

compiling images that match their scripts on Pinterest. Pinterest boards are filled with scenic and thematic

photos of the user's desired reality (like the descriptions that opened this work), photos and stills of the

characters of the universe, as well as collages of outfits, accessories, hairstyles, and makeup.

There are numerous *shifting methods* for moving from your current reality to your desired reality, often marked by *shifting symptoms* that are interpreted to mean one is getting close to the desired reality, including tingling, flashing lights, feeling heavy or feeling weightless, etc. These methods often include instructions to lie down, visualize your desired reality, repeat *affirmations* (positive statements to ease doubt and motivate shifting), and other concentrated and repetitive behaviors to induce a trance-like state. The various methods bear names like the "Raven method, "[1] the "Alice in Wonderland method,"[2] the "Elevator method,"[3] and the "Estelle method."[4] Shifters sometimes share the method that they use and encourage newcomers to mix and match methods to find what works for them. Agency is embodied through the particular methods a shifter uses.

Some of the most common themes of reality shifting discourse are "tips and tricks" for people struggling to shift and "shifting motivation" for those losing hope that they will ever shift. It seems that the inherent difficulty (or impossibility) of performing a practice of questionable attainability ultimately fuels the discourse, keeping the community connected through the sharing of information and experiences. The practice of reality shifting seems to embody the adage "easy to learn, hard to master." Of course, "mastering" is an imprecise word for a practice whose plausibility transgresses all established scientific knowledge and principles, but the achievability of reality shifting is not the focus of this investigation, nor is defining the actual experience

---

[1] "lay on your back in a starfish position (no limbs touching, make like a star with your body). count to 100. after you reach 100, visualize your Dr, say your affirmations, and go to sleep. you should wake up in your Dr."

[2] "imagine yourself sitting against a tree. then visualize someone from your Dr running past you. follow them. they will then jump down a rabbit hole, continue following them... fall for as long as you like. while you're falling you should start to feel symptoms of shifting. once you hit the bottom, visualize a table with a key on it, look around to find the door. pick up the key and open the door. on the other side of the door should be your dr, go through the door and close it. go to bed, when you wake up, you should be in your Dr."

[3] "imagine yourself in an elevator, you are going up. affirm between each floor. imagine each floor is a different scene from your Dr, really visualize and imagine it. when you feel like you're there, get out at that level. visualize yourself in your desired body and you should be there."

[4] "pick a song (I usually pick one that reminds me of my Dr or a person from my dr, you do not have to do this though, it is my personal preference.) imagine you are dancing to or enjoying the song with someone from your Dr. at the end of the song, they lead you to a door and open it, revealing a bright white light. say your affirmations and walk through the door. you should only see white light. you will experience the normal symptoms (numbness, tingling, feelings of heaviness, feeling like you're floating, etc). once the symptoms subside, affirm once more and go to bed. you should wake up in your Dr."

of those who claim to be shifting realities. Instead, this study considers the context in which the concept of reality shifting appeals to an audience and what engagement with its premises provides to that audience. Hence, the term "reality shifting" will hereafter refer to the practice, its promises, and/or its pursuit.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic continues into its third year. The collected TikTok and Reddit data range from early September 2020 through the time of collection (late December 2021/early January 2022). As the data represent some of the most popular reality shifting content, it is clear that the trend boomed in the first year of quarantine and continues to be relevant through at least the next year. Though the data revealed only a handful of explicit references to COVID-19 or to quarantine, the psychological effects of the pandemic align too closely with the refuge promised by reality shifting to not consider it the unspoken context in the broader environment of risk society and individualization. An explanation for the absence of references might be that social media is itself an escape from the pandemic, and thereby content referencing COVID-19 will be less popular.

Practically, quarantine meant people had more free time to spend on social media and discover reality shifting. On a deeper level, however, the pandemic was a sudden and striking reminder of human mortality, upended all daily routines, and left people unprecedentedly isolated. It is well documented that COVID-19 and its consequences have led to increased psychological distress and loneliness, particularly in young people (Somer 2021). In many ways, the pandemic epitomizes risk society and its uncertainty. Quarantining is the physical embodiment of loss of control and agency, as well as the prohibition of intimacy outside of the home. Unequivocally, the COVID-19 pandemic rocked people's sense of security. As opposed to fate and fatalism, Giddens' "fateful moments" are events that threaten the "protective cocoon" that "defends the individual's ontological security… the 'business as usual' attitude," and reveal high-consequence risks for individuals (1991:114). Living in an "apocalyptic world" in which such fateful moments are frequent, individuals may "feel

that governments, scientists or other technical specialists can be trusted to take the appropriate steps" to

neutralize dangers (Giddens 1991:131). However, as previously discussed, there is no overarching authority to

turn to as traditional systems break down and the future is increasingly uncertain. Under modernity,

knowledge-claims from experts that are disseminated in good faith are redacted or revised, leading to the

uncertainty and uncertain behavior that continues to characterize the pandemic's evolution. Giddens writes:

> The more or less constant, profound and rapid momentum of change characteristic of modern institutions, coupled with structured reflexivity, mean that on the level of everyday practice as well as philosophical interpretation, nothing can be taken for granted. What is acceptable/appropriate/recommended behaviour today may be seen differently tomorrow in the light of altered circumstances or incoming knowledge-claims. (Pp. 133–134)

The most divisive controversies of the pandemic, however, are derived from conspiratorial information devoid of

scientific backing, and demonstrate precisely why Manjoo (2008) contends that we live in a "post-fact society."

Indeed, the "facts" to which one subscribes and the associated ideological camps present both an opportunity

for individualization as well as the assumption of risk in the event that they are the "wrong facts." Beyond

pandemic politics, both sides of the modern culture war are disillusioned with authority and its hegemonic

narratives about racial violence, immigration, corporate greed, etc. In reaction to this, people may seek out and

construct their own knowledge systems that allow them a sense of groundedness, purpose, and truth. Reality

shifters claim the truth of reality shifting and collaborate to delimit its boundaries.

What are the prognostics for the future as a young person who is simultaneously overwhelmed with the

expanding possibilities of life trajectories and the crushing threat of danger and annihilation? The issue is

existential at heart. Giddens (1991) writes, "If there is one theme which unites nearly all authors who have

written on the self in modern society, it is the assertion that the individual experiences feelings of powerlessness

in relation to a diverse and large-scale social universe" (p. 191). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) hold that a "life

of one's own" is a "highly socialized existence, utterly dependent on institutions," which is why

individualization in practice is "neither the expression of a bubbling individualism and egoism... nor a life in

which individuals float free in determining themselves, but rather a life of thorough conformity that is binding on more and more groups within the context of labour markets buffered by the welfare state" (p. 166). The "life of one's own" promised by reality shifting, however, is not bound by material reality. Disillusioned by constrained individualization, reality shifters regain their power and reject the institutions that limit them in favor of boundless realities of their own fabrication where they can "float free in determining themselves."

To explain the sudden emergence of the reality shifting community, I argue that the effects of COVID-19 and the existential threat it posed acted as a catalyst for the unstable cocktail of teen angst, the pressure of individualization, and life in a risk society. These factors, along with individual differences (such as the pull to fictional media worlds and openness to the metaphysical), lead a certain group of people to accept reality shifting. However small this niche phenomenon is, it illuminates one way people are dealing with the current moment and the practices adopted when crisis and desire meet. Shifting is active escapism tailored to the present, dire moment; it is an escape hatch.

To return to Giddens (1991), ontological security is established and reaffirmed through everyday behavior. Since "anxiety, trust and everyday routines of social interaction are so closely bound up with one another," Giddens proposes that one "can readily understand the rituals of day-to-day life as coping mechanisms" (p. 46). What fills the lacuna when standard coping mechanisms are upended by a global pandemic? Giddens invokes Goffman's (1967) observations of interaction rituals between people in which even simple bodily gestures, facial expressions, and gaze—between friends, foes, or strangers on the street—negotiate emotions, expectations, and establish acceptance and respect. To them, such interactions always present opportunity, choice, and risk (Goffman 1967). Despite risk, Giddens contends that the trust employed in interaction rituals "[touches] on the most basic aspects of ontological security" (1991:47). Routinized interactions call forth the psychological concepts of mental schemas and scripts. Schemas organize knowledge and assumptions about the world and can be mobilized into scripts that guide sequences of events. Scripts guide

action and interaction in daily life to make them comfortable and predictable and conserve mental energy. A

reality shifter's script functions similarly. Both scripts protect against uncertainty and give the individual a sense

of control. Alternatively, when scripts are derailed, people feel uncertain and uncomfortable. Enter COVID-19.

Its mode of transmission necessitates isolation and renders all physical interaction suspect. Rituals are

abandoned and all that guides interaction is overwhelming, ever-developing, and sometimes contradictory expert

direction. Quarantining, social distancing, sanitizing, masking, and every measure in between must be

continuously negotiated by individuals and weighed against risk of sickness or death. Many weighed infection

against facing hunger or houselessness if they left their jobs. In the United States, particularly, the government's

lax and disjointed approach to containing COVID-19 gave power BURDENED? to individuals to make risky

decisions and shoulder the consequences. In summary, COVID-19 is one of many catastrophes that break down

the "protective cocoon" defending one's ontological security (p. 114). The resulting anxiety threatens the self

because the self is understood through its relationship to the object-world previously held in place by a security

system of knowledge (p. 43). The points made here guide the following data analysis: paramount to reality

shifting is the ability for shifters to wield control over their lives, identity, and relationships.

METHODS

The current study employs an inductive method through data collection on TikTok and Reddit.

TikTok and Reddit were chosen out of the three most popular platforms for reality shifting content (TikTok,

Reddit, Amino) because of their built-in mechanism to organize posts by popularity by way of

views/likes/upvotes, which allows the location of the most popular content within channels dedicated to reality

shifting. The popularity of content is used here as a proxy for gauging to what extent the messaging resonates

and is consequently endorsed by audiences who engage with the post and increase its popularity. Of course,

content can reach popularity for negative or controversial reasons, but the reality shifting community is

relatively insular in terms of engagement, and a quick scan of the comments confirms that reality shifting posts most often reach popularity as a result of support and validation from its viewers, not "hate" from outsiders.

The best way to reach the insular communities of reality shifting differed between platforms. On Reddit, data was collected from the most popular reality shifting subreddit (r/shiftingrealities) with 54.3k members. All posts in the subreddit were organized by most upvotes and the top 200 posts were collected for content analysis. On TikTok, the most popular hashtags for reality shifting were located (#shiftingrealities at 3.1 billion total views at the time of collection, #shifttok at 1.9 billion views, #shiftingrealitys at 1.2 billion views, and #realityshifting at 1.1 billion views). The 568 most popular TikToks were collected for data analysis; 168 TikToks were repeated (tagged under multiple hashtags) and were only coded once, resulting in a total of 400 unique TikToks and 600 pieces of data between TikTok and Reddit.

All Reddit posts and most TikToks were in English. TikToks in Spanish were translated by the author and aided by Google Translate. TikToks in Portuguese and Russian were translated via Google Translate using its audio to text function or text to text function.

A content analysis was performed on the collected data in order to track recurring themes. The categories of the coding scheme were as follows: Defining Shifting, Science/Epistemology, Escapism, Control/Agency, Individuality/Self-Efficacy, Relationships (Romantic, Platonic, Familial, Not Specified) Physical Touch, Sex/Sexuality, Real-Life Concerns/Motivation, Experiencing Shifting/Affective Responses, Current Reality vs. Desired Reality, Respawning, Online Community, and Miscellaneous. Relevant quotes were copied or transcribed from Reddit and TikTok into a document under the respective categories and the quotes became hypertext for a hyperlink to the corresponding datum. In the case of relevant nonverbal information (most often in TikToks), descriptions of the information were written and became hypertext.

Limitations

Limitations of this methodology include the focus on Reddit and TikTok to the exclusion of other platforms with reality shifting content, like Amino or Instagram. Further, the data collection on Reddit was limited to one reality shifting subreddit and data collection on TikTok was limited to the four most popular reality shifting hashtags. Other limitations include the nature of data collection on social media. The identities of the users and their demographic details could not be confirmed, and thus the current study made assumptions and generalizations based on available information to assert that young women are the population under investigation. Available information included when the users explicitly identified their age and gender as is common on Reddit (e.g. 20F or 17M), or when the users appear in their TikToks and their gender is extrapolated from their usernames, their feminine/masculine gender presentation, and/or pronouns appearing in their user bio. Granted, such assumptions of gender are hardly foolproof. The current study also assumes that the posts and their content reflected the true feelings of the users. Usernames are eliminated from the data or pseudo-usernames are created when necessary in order to protect the user's identities, but it is in the nature of publicly accessible online content that the posts and users may be found online if the content still exists and is set to public.

3

·•·ॐ·॰ ☽ ☿☾ ॰·६·•· EXISTENTIAL CRISIS AND ESTABLISHING THE SCIENCE OF SHIFTING

EVIDENCE OF THE RISK SOCIETY AND DISILLUSIONMENT WITH CURRENT REALITY

To bridge the theory and data, I begin by presenting evidence of the risk society in shifters'

disillusionment with reality. While indication of the effects of individualization are revealed more in the positive

desires that constitute the next two chapters (freedom to), the seeping of risk into shifters' lives is revealed in

negative desires (freedom from). A significant portion of the data reveal persistent expressions of a desire for

safety and freedom from violence and trauma. Users answering frequently asked questions often include "Is

shifting safe?" to which one user replies "Yes, it's extremely safe. There might be some side effects like drowsiness

after, but there's no actual harm that comes to you." Other users clarify that to shield oneself from danger, one

must simply script that they are "safe from all harm," with many posts suggesting some version of "script that

you have a very high pain tolerance, or cannot feel pain at all" and "script that you cannot be killed" and are

"immortal" or "if you die, you will return to your CR." One can also script that they "won't forget their safe

word or action" that brings them safely back to their current reality. Another shifter scripts "sicknesses and

mental illnesses i am immune to." As is highly pertinent to the temporal context, one shifter's TikTok skit

included scripting COVID-19 out of their desired reality. While these abilities are widely accepted as legitimate,

there is more discourse on the potential to accrue trauma—likely because shifters distinguish between physical

harm and mental harm, the latter of which is attached to the consciousness that remains intact from the current

reality to the desired reality and back again. One user advises to "script that you cannot bring back trauma,"

explaining that this would ensure that "if you experience some kind of trauma in your DR, it will not come back

with you to your CR." While some users voice their opposition to the feasibility of this stipulation, the mere existence of such dialogue reveals shifters' consideration of the risks and repercussions of harm. Nevertheless, trauma would likely be avoided if the shifter scripted safety from all harm, but these kinds of discussions reflect a desire for realism. However, many still desire safety from serious forms of violence. One shifter shares, "you might not want to, but I personally decided to write that I am safe, meaning that I cannot be sold to trafficking, sexually abused, kidnapped, etc." Their choice of examples of dangers is both alarming and somewhat gendered. The threat of sexual assault and rape is revealed again through a TikTok roleplay where the shifter is extremely inebriated and Draco Malfoy "is ready to protect her with his life" from another male character whose motives with the unconscious shifter are suspect. Sexual violence is considered again in the final chapter about sex and relationships. There are two other posts explicitly condemning purposeful violence. Set to a sad, acoustic score with the lyrics "try not to abuse your power," the TikTok deplores "When you teach someone how to shift just for them to rape someone." The caption reads "!!TW!!: mention of rape... if you ever shift, please know that they are real people, don't cheat, kill, e.t.c." The second TikTok uses the same audio and says "when you help someone shift just for them to kill people in their dr." The denunciation of senseless violence (as distinct from righteous violence of the MCU and similar worlds) reinforces a desire for utopia instead of risk. Shifters care not only about their own safety but the safety of the other people/characters in their various realities as well as their fellow human shifters. After sharing a list of scripting suggestions, one TikToker implores her audience, "a lot of these are just really convenient, but most of them are to keep you safe, so please at least consider them." As a community, reality shifters prioritize wellbeing, which is illustrated by their use of content warnings/trigger warnings in potentially sensitive online content. The safety of the DR—and by extension, the removal of risk—is ensured by the control that shifters wield over their desired reality and their aversion to causing harm or being harmed.

Some shifters reflect on their attraction to reality shifting and desire to leave their current situations based on limited opportunities, success, and general apathy toward their uncertain but likely bleak futures. They illustrate both motivation away from the current reality and motivation towards their desired reality. In response to those who say "You have to appreciate and love this reality," one Redditor says "no thanks...I am sorry I live no princess life I can be happy about. I don't like it here, and I am sure as hell not letting that stop me from shifting just because you said so." Another user (whose age and gender seem to be an outlier) explains:

> I am 25M and unfortunately, my life has been really tragic so far. My career never took off, all my dreams got shattered, my family is not in a good situation, my social life is nonexistent, my financial situation is very bleak (practically broke), I never experienced a romantic relationship in my life and so on. I feel like I missed out on enjoying so many aspects of life that I should have enjoyed at this stage. Therefore, I've scripted a reality where all my unfulfilled desires in my CR are fulfilled in my DR and I live a life filled with joy and prosperity. I'm hoping to permashift to that reality and never come back to the nightmare of a life I've lived in my CR so far. I really hope I succeed asap and go on to live my life!

His concerns are broad and touch upon the main desires found in the rest of the data. He is disappointed in his career and dreams (self) and family, friends, and romance (relationships). His career and economic situation is likely constrained in the same way that Silva (2013) finds. The promise of "joy and prosperity" in a life that he has the power to create is why he wants to *permashift* (permanently shift) to his desired reality and leave his current reality forever. One's desired reality offers an opportunity to "befriend and form relationships with characters or people you look up to, ...learn new things and experience magic or things you otherwise thought were impossible...you can truly live the life you want!" Another post asks, "Isn't it amazing that one could live a completely different life, away from all the troubles that they are facing in their current lives? I for one am so thankful I found this community and a potential solution for all the issues I'm facing in my CR." Ultimately, shifting presents an opportunity to create a life of one's own with all of the possibility and none of the risk.

Shifters also condemn hierarchies of power—though often in passing—by scripting them out of their desired realities. Sandwiched between the scripting suggestions "you always smell good" and "you have infinite money" is the declaration "no homophobia and racism in my DR." Experienced in their own lives or witnessed

in the lives of others, shifters realize that choices are limited and risks are compounded when one holds

marginalized (and intersecting) identities. One post considered outside perceptions of the reality shifting

community when they write, "*insert unfunny joke about Gen Z being so done with this reality that they're

leaving here.*" The user's perceived unfunniness of the joke implies either that "being so done with this reality"

is not the reason for shifting or because the seriousness of this reason is not funny. Regardless, references to the

shifters' disillusionment with the current reality and the possibility of their unique desired reality support this

motivation.

REALITY SHIFTING KNOWLEDGE-CLAIMS AND APPEALS TO SCIENCE

The vast majority of reality shifting content arguably falls under the umbrella of "shifting motivation,"

which is content that excites, inspires, and motivates others to continue trying to shift realities when they

encounter difficulty. Such content includes verbal encouragement, sharing shifting experiences, and

explanations of the epistemology of reality shifting, the messages of which all lead back to the power that reality

shifting gives the shifter. The focus of the second half of this chapter is first on how the overarching claim of

reality shifting is established and defended and how these practices bestow upon shifters legitimacy as

knowledge-producers. Second, I consider how the cosmic-level ontological claims of reality shifting imbue

reality shifters with endless control.

Shifters disseminate information, tips, and motivational reminders through social media, collectively

creating and negotiating the boundaries of the practice. Defending the claims of reality shifting seems not to be

oriented towards an outside, hostile audience whom they aim to convert. Instead, the discussion of legitimacy

seems to orbit around reaffirming concepts and dispelling doubts within the reality shifting community, as well

as convincing newcomers (who are already drawn to the allure of reality shifting) to accept the practice as

legitimate. This is necessary because, as one user writes, there may be "a lot of doubt in people that hinders

shifting" that "comes from not understanding that there is science behind it." There are a few recurring theories referenced to bolster the claim of shifting as a science. Shifters point most often and reliably to multiverse theory to explain shifting, and compare it to astral projection and quantum jumping. An oft revered figure is Neville Goddard, an author and proponent of self-help via mysticism, and is cited as a key developer of manifestation (which occupies overlapping digital and ideological territory with reality shifting).

There is also a contentious CIA document purportedly proving reality shifting, which is often cited and shared but also considered "misinformation" by one reality shifter because its premises were based on outdated "cognitive and affective neuroscience." This demonstration of commitment to updated scientific principles is paralleled by how often reality shifters employ the word "science" to express their claims to legitimacy: "First, let's talk science." However, they also note that reality shifting is a fringe science that is not yet universally accepted as it should be. One TikToker complains, "Shifting is literally a science but it's such a taboo science compared to more established sciences." A Reddit post likens shifting to gravity as a "basic law of the universe" that exists whether you "believe" in it or not. Another post promises that shifting is "100% guaranteed because it's a law" and "law cannot be erased." Reality shifters also explicitly position themselves as followers of science (an identity that increasingly carries political connotation), explaining, "I study medicine... I'm the type of person that if something doesn't have a scientific or logical explanation, I won't believe it." Another says, "talking as a person of science myself...it would be interesting to carry forward more studies and more experiments on shifting." The lack of scientific acknowledgment, shifters contend, is because "it's difficult to conduct scientific research on a phenomenon like shifting because there is so little we know about our consciousness and the universe as a whole...Modern science has yet to find an actual way to accurately research these topics, but that should not discredit the legitimacy of these topics as a whole. Shifting has just recently exploded in popularity, so there has not yet been any shifting-specific scientific studies done." This gap in knowledge leads some shifters to want to undertake experiments of their own. One Reddit post declares that

"some well-known TikTokers (Shift-Tokers) are running experiments now to prove that shifting is, in fact, a gateway to the multiverse," and one TikToker speaks directly to their audience: "If you need proof of shifting, listen up, I have an experiment for you…" Despite the desire to conduct research and increase the acceptance of reality shifting, one user expresses that "it's hard to find other shifting scientists to work on projects with" because non-shifters will "think you're crazy." Within their own community, however, shifters are generally regarded as authoritative and intelligent. They also claim expertise and from this expertise, the ability to explain and disseminate information, adduce principles they believe apply to reality shifting, and even conduct their own form of experimentation in order to establish literature on shifting.

Given the vagueness of reality shifting's scientific backing, shifters also elevate personal experience as proof or evidence. While there is "no general scientific consensus" on phenomena related to reality shifting like astral projection, they "are widely documented by personal experience" and shifters argue that the "sheer abundance of these personal experiences is what leads to the common belief that these are legitimate experiences." Likely, the most encouragement shifters see online are testimonials from others that they have successfully shifted. One Reddit post shouts, "SHIFTING IS REAL AND IT'S AWESOME!!!!!!!… AND IT WASN'T A DREAM…AND I'M HERE TO TELL YOU THAT IT'S REAL!!!!!!!" Another post claims, "shifting is real. How do I know? I've shifted." Other posts express surprise and validation to find out that their mother, grandmother, grandfather, or uncle, also knows about and practices reality shifting, though perhaps under a different name. Establishing reality shifting as a folk science empowers the shifters to structure the possibilities and limits of their existence and command authority within a community of shifters.

CONSCIOUSNESS, INDIVIDUAL(IZED) POWER, AND NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY

Epistemic authority established, what are the implications of reality shifting's tenets? The ontological claim of reality shifting is that one's consciousness can transcend and travel between different material realities. It

presupposes mind-body dualism and posits the importance and strength of the consciousness. This type of language functions as empowering shifting motivation in addition to a salve—if not an outright solution—for existential dread. One Reddit post puts it succinctly: "We are all the same infinite awareness experiencing life through a limited body and series of thoughts and experiences. You have existed forever and will continue to exist forever because awareness is constant and unchanging." A poem reposted to Reddit implores, "Understand that your soul is not bound by three-dimensional earthly experience." Repeating affirmations is a popular part of shifting methods and examples of affirmations illustrate these ideas: "I am pure consciousness," "I am bound to no reality," and "I am more than this physical body." These ideas lead one TikToker to realize that "REALITY SHIFTING CAN MAKE YOU IMMORTAL" with the caption "WE CAN CHEAT DEATH, WHY IS NO ONE TALKING ABOUT THIS." Cartesian dualism's contribution to reality shifting is the ability for one's consciousness to move between realities if one's fleshly existence comes to an end. In the context of Beck's risk society in which the threat of the end is imminent, this is an immensely attractive spiritual claim. Shifters come to believe so deeply in reality shifting and the multiverse theory that they ask, "shouldn't scientists everywhere be overjoyed, and shouldn't the media be interviewing everyone they could on the subject?" This Reddit post answers: "You have to remember that the majority of the shifting community is made up of 13-25-year-olds trying to go to Hogwarts to *date* Draco Malfoy. Not everyone's going to take our community seriously." Here, the limits of their epistemic authority are acknowledged—but hardly dwelled upon.

Not only does reality shifting claim an infinite consciousness for the shifter, but proposes that each person is and is of the universe or another higher power. "Remember," a Reddit post reminds, "what you are before being a physical body, you are the thing that makes shifting possible, be it God/the Universe/your Higher Self or whatever its name." A reposted image and quote reads, "We are not humans experiencing the universe, we are the universe experiencing itself." Shifters can feel more than immortal: they can feel omnipotent. Giddens (1991) contends that the opposite of powerlessness is omnipotence. Omnipotence protects ontological security,

but being a "puppeteer" is ultimately a "fantasy state" (p. 149). Still, a Redditor exalts, "I have complete control on the world." This message echoes frequent and widespread reminders that the shifter alone holds the power to shift, and that any restrictions or limits to this power are purely psychological. Indeed, the amount of control they wield over their desired reality and its every event is characteristic only of an all-powerful entity; a Reddit post claims: "your subconscious is god." This capacity, however, can be accessed by anyone. The same post declares "Shifting is WITHIN YOU." Shifters do not consider themselves to be inherently exceptional but to have simply tapped into their power. The pivotal difference is that "the universe brought this knowledge" to them and they are in communication with the universe through angel numbers and signs (see Virtue and Brown 2009).

To return to shifting motivation, the theoretical basis of reality shifting informs the encouragement that permeates this supportive community. Shifters are instructed to realize and embrace their own power and self-efficacy. One post reads, "Just know that you got this. You already have everything you need. Your subconscious is way more powerful than you think." Another says "all you need is yourself," "put trust in yourself" and "know you can shift. know you have that power." This messaging is needed when shifters are overwhelmed with the demands of individualization and the paralyzing effects of choice, risk, and uncertainty in their current realities.

At the same time that the shifting community is steadfast in these beliefs, it encourages modifying reality shifting methods to fit the unique shifter. One Reddit post proposed that shifting is like walking because it must be learned and everyone's journey proceeds at its own pace with its own strategies. After sharing their experiences, a user writes "first of all this all is my experience and what I need. For you it may be totally different. Everyone's shifting journey is different. This may not even make sense to you. Take what resonates and leave what doesn't." In this atmosphere, shifters can embrace their individuality and create their own individual journey with no judgment, pressure, or risk imposed.

In light of the DIY ethic of reality shifting as well as its metaphysical claims, I draw a connection between shifting and New Age spirituality. "New Age" is used here as an umbrella term for metaphysical beliefs and practices that grew popular in the West in the 1970s. Reality shifting might be considered part of a resurgence of New Ageism, along with Reiki, manifestation, and other beliefs currently enjoying online popularity. New Age beliefs have been investigated alongside *risk perception*— arguably the psychological equivalent to Beck's risk society thesis—and revealed to be correlated so that higher perceived risk is associated with stronger beliefs in the pseudoscientific/mystic/supernatural (Sjoberg and af Wahlberg 2002; Chauvin, Hermand, and Mullet 2008). In one study, societal risk perception included the perceived danger of environmental and security policies such as nuclear waste, chemical plants, urban violence, genetically modified organisms, marijuana, and hospital waste (Chauvin et al. 2008). New Age spirituality has also been linked to neoliberalism (Frisk and Nynäs 2012). The era saw a loss of confidence in government and institutions and thus the privatization of religion (p. 4). Whereas traditional religion was hierarchical and dogmatic, spirituality was more personal, individual, tolerant, and anti-hierarchical, emphasizing "individualism, self-reliance, and personal freedom" (Kyle 1995:836). Frisk and Nynäs (2012) point to an emphasis on the power of human beings, writing that "the individual is radically empowered… not through studies or revelation, but through inner experience" (pp. 8–9). The "spiritual potential of every human being is affirmed" in the same way that reality shifters implore converts to realize the power they hold within themselves, and "spiritual growth is conceived of as closely related to the individual′s psychological development and maturation," recalling Silva's (2013) neoliberal therapeutic model (Frisk and Nynäs 2012:9). Like reality shifters' desire for omnipotent power, New Agers saw themselves as gods (Kyle 1995:838). At the same time, they believed in "one divine reality" of the cosmos and this "oneness leads to unity among all aspects of existence" (p. 838). Taken together, competing impulses surface: the feeling of oneness with the universe, humanity, and all life versus using the power of the universe for self-interest and self-enhancement. Whereas Kyle writes that "Once enlightened,

humanity will enact the political programs necessary to build a new society," the neoliberal reality of reality shifting is that attention is turned inward (p. 389). Silva (2013) writes, "the therapeutic self has become a crucial cultural resource for ascribing meaning and order to one's life amid the flux and uncertainty of a flexible economy and post-traditional social world" (p. 19). Feeling powerless to successfully navigate or change the structures governing their lives that are simultaneously immutable yet in flux, young people focus on the transformation of the self and not society, molding the self to fit into it.

4

•·☾·∘ ☽ ✧ ☾ ∘·☽·• SELF: AGENCY AND CONSTRUCTING BIOGRAPHY

When reality shifters post online about their experiences or plans for shifting, they reveal their concerns and preoccupations, from the minutiae of physical appearance and everyday life to strained relationships, threats of harm, and oppressive power structures. These concerns and desires are uncovered implicitly when reality shifters divulge the details of their scripts or suggest useful things for other shifters to script for themselves and explicitly when shifters reflect on the opportunities shifting creates. The two primary spheres of concern are self and relationships. This chapter focuses on the construction of self through appearance, abilities, and the corresponding feelings of agency and self-efficacy as shifters enact an ideal self influenced by neoliberalism.

The desire to exercise control and agency over selfhood runs throughout every aspect of reality shifting. First, the basic mechanics of reality shifting empower the shifter to realize an ideal self and manage their daily activities. The shifter claims to shift for as long as they want by scripting their current reality/desired reality time ratio: for instance, only one hour may have elapsed in their current reality after returning from spending one day in their desired reality. Shifters assure others that they cannot possibly get stuck in their DR; a safeword will prompt a shift back to the shifter's CR. A convenient addition to the mechanics of reality shifting is the imagined *Lifa app*, which is conceived of as an app on a reality shifter's phone in their desired reality (or journal, if their desired reality is pre-digital). The app gives shifters more control in their desired reality and "allows you anything you want." Renderings and explanations of the Lifa app posted to Reddit and TikTok include abilities like controlling ones clone, editing scripts, changing the weather, and features like "appearance," "bank account," "closet," "spawn," "manifest food, clothes, and other items" and the date and time of both the current

reality and desired reality. While scripting allows for limitless possibilities at the time of planning it, one may view it as too static when agency is needed in a desired reality. The Lifa app is one remedy to this, but one Reddit user affirms, "your script is NOT and NEVER will be higher authority than your own consciousness and will. You know what you wrote and you know what you mean."

Scripting personal details and physical appearance is highly common and seems to be the standard way to begin scripting, revealing the preeminence of the physical self that is unsurprising for young women whose beauty is highly valued. While reality shifters sometimes push back against beauty standards, they most often indulge them. One TikTok user shares a script template for people who are struggling with scripting, prompts the specification of desired name, age, birthday, gender, nicknames, sexuality, race, height, weight, skin color, body type, eye color, hair color, any hair on your body, clothes, jewelry, tattoos, nails, body smell, makeup, accessories, personality, likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses. There are many script suggestions that reveal reality shifters' awareness and acceptance of the social value of beauty and "cleanliness," which is especially emphasized for women and girls and penalized for any violation. TikTok and Reddit posts share common things to script in relation to the body (iterations of the following desires surfaced at least twice): "you are effortlessly attractive," "never sweat," "no greasy hair," "don't burp or fart," "don't have body odor," "no bad hair days," "eyebrows on fleek," "unlimited clothes," and "you don't have any hair on your body except for the top of your head and your eyebrows." Other, more specific suggestions include "your lips are soft and never chapped," "you have naturally long eyelashes," "you have a gorgeous smile and a nice laugh," "big boobs," "you never have to go to the bathroom at the wrong time (TRUST ME)." One TikTok suggests a "hair dr" that promises: "cut and dye your hair penalty free; find the style that best fits you." There is a clear aversion to fatness in both current reality and desired reality, revealed in such scripting details as: "no double chin," "don't gain weight in stomach," "you have a fast metabolism," "you have a perfect side profile and a sharp jawline," "my clone works out for me (I added this to my script so when I'm gone my clone can [get] me skinnyyyy." Giddens (1991) contends that body

regimes are part and parcel of the reflexive project of self-identity, especially for women, who, in the pursuit of slimness and youthfulness, will diet or undergo cosmetic surgery (Scharff, 2011). This is especially true for women. Giddens (1991) uses anorexia nervosa as a case study for such concerns, noting that it is a disorder most prevalent among young women and is thought to be unique to the modern era. The disorder, he argues, "represents a striving for security" within risk culture, as a "tightly controlled body is an emblem of a safe existence in an open social environment" (p. 107-108). He quotes a woman diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, who proclaims: "It is risky business, being a woman" (p. 104). Scripts also include the desire to manage the bodily functions of women (and all people) with vaginas: I "won't ever bleed through anything," "I have minimal discharge," "my discharge doesn't stain my underwear," "I don't get camel toes," "I don't queef." Multiple TikTokers suggest scripting out having a period at all to avoid "deal[ing] with that mess," but one Reddit post explains that they want to have their period and instead opts for scripting "that I don't get cramps, my flow is light, and I don't get huge mood swings/other harsh symptoms." Other typically feminine issues addressed included "you can easily walk in heels without any pain." Such scripting details reflect desires to make their lives better in light of gender-based expectations.

Despite the overwhelming endorsement of hegemonic beauty, there is also some acknowledgment of these standards. One TikToker posts "things to script pt. 3" and writes, "no cellulite or stretch marks (unless you like them bc they are pretty and there's nothing wrong with them)." This type of evaluation reflects a contradiction in women's lives, where physical beauty is still expected, sought after, and rewarded at the same time that beauty standards are questioned and dismantled in the movement for self-love. Further, natural beauty is heralded (e.g. "naturally long eyelashes," "is very hot without trying") while "fake" or excessive efforts to achieve beauty are looked down upon. The same TikTok post suggests a script idea for male shifters that similarly extends the option of rejecting the common standard: "big [eggplant emoji] (if you're a guy and want it)" (the eggplant emoji being the common internet euphemism for penis).

Based on the collected data, it appears that reality shifters are simultaneously conscious of hegemonic beauty standards but their desires are still overwhelmingly normative. However, one must not fault young women for desiring the qualities that are socially rewarded (beauty, slimness, likeability) and not wanting qualities that are burdened with stigma (fatness, menstruation). As Bay-Cheng (2019) notes, "not all youth are inclined to reject or resist the status quo; instead, most reproduce it, consciously or not" (p. 465). In Scharff's (2011) study on individualization, neoliberalism, and Muslim women, the young women were aware of sexism but blamed individual shortcomings in the production of an "autonomous, responsible, neoliberal self" (p. 127).

The shifter's desired personality, attributes, and abilities are similarly brought to light in scripting ideas as well as in the skits characteristic of TikTok. Shifters script features like "you walk with confidence," "everyone finds you funny," "good at flirting," "everyone's undeniably attracted to me," and "Nice to everyone. Sometimes flirtatious to people. Rude to those who are rude to me. Knows how to defend myself." The subject of school surfaces often and shifters specify things like "grades come easy," "my homework does itself and it's all correct," "school is only 2 weeks a month," "always get straight A's," "understand and ace every subject," and "all the teachers love you." One Reddit post suggests to "script that you can learn things really fast (math, languages, songs, physical stuff such as dancing or fighting, spells if you are going to a DR with magic, etc.)." Other posts similarly highlighted abilities one might want, like playing the violin, drawing, figure skating, learning to fight from *Attack on Titan* character Levi Ackerman, and the desire to "never burn food when cooking." One's desired reality offers a complete makeover of the self and daily life, which can be harnessed for mundane enjoyments or enhancements of self-esteem and self-importance. To attest to the first motivation, two Reddit users celebrated having candy in their respective desired realities, which would be off-limits in their current realities due to braces and diabetes. On the other end of the spectrum, two frequent desired reality narratives are ones where the shifter is famous (monikered quite literally "Fame DR") and where the shifter is a hero of some

kind. In "Fame" desired realities, shifters imagine being on talk shows, being hounded by paparazzi, and their fans making edits of them.

After Harry Potter, the second most common desired reality as revealed by the data is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), where the shifter becomes an Avenger themselves and even the "strongest avenger" because they can script any abilities. A TikTok skit in which the shifter is attacked by a massive wolf and manages to hold its jaws open is met with "Thor just standing behind [them] watching in awe." Another TikTok reads "*me casually practicing spells and defeating Voldemort at 2 a.m.*" In one shifter's wild west desired reality, she is an expert miner and alerts the town that their mine will collapse. She writes, "I feel so happy that I saved so many lives, even if it's in another reality." Another popular desired reality is *My Hero Academia* (MHA) where shifters have powerful "quirks"—superhuman abilities not unlike the superheroes of the MCU or the magic of Harry Potter. In MHA, originally a Japanese manga, the word translated to "quirk" in English also translates literally to "individuality" (myheroacademia.fandom.com 2022). Shifters seek to shape their own biographies and find that an exceptional life as a remarkable person with powerful abilities is uniquely motivating and gratifying. Their motive is not to fit in but to stand out. "Fame" desired realities and superhero desired realities allow shifters to be recognized, famed, and celebrated for their abilities and individuality.

These desires can be contextualized in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2001) observations on women's individualization in the modern world. The reckoning that individualization creates plays out in the lives of girls and women who are more free from the clutches of the patriarchal home than ever before (p. 77). Having increasing education and employment opportunities, women tend to be motivated and careful in choosing their careers, base their decisions on their own interests and less on future children, and see employment as their route to independence instead of early marriage. However, women simultaneously find difficulty finding long-term jobs and sufficient job training, suffer pay disparities, and experience workplace discrimination or harassment (p. 88). These setbacks are emblematic of a stalled gender revolution and lead Beck and Beck-Gernsheim to claim

that "this tense relationship between women's life plans and their actual chances of fulfilling them is a breeding ground for insecurity, anxiety and disappointment" (p. 88). Even before entering a competitive workforce, students face growing pressure to outperform other students (p. 81). What reality shifting promises is the creation and fulfillment of a desired biography. In line with individualistic neoliberal tendencies, shifters turn their focus inward to imagine their ideal self. They understand their fate to be their own responsibility, not the responsibility of the collective. However, when shifters are empowered to control their bodies and identities, they tend to choose characteristics of a beautiful and successful poster-woman of commercialized feminism. They do not propose a more radical envisioning of a world in which individual worth is not based on beauty, capital gain, or fame. True feminism is "pushed away from a performatively produced self that is self-responsible, autonomous and in no need of collective political struggle" (Scharff 2011:127).

5

·•·⸛·∘ ☽ ✧⟨⟨∘·⸜·• RELATIONSHIPS, SEX, AND INTIMACY

Referenced or implied in virtually every data point is the presence of other people in shifters' desired

realities and the emotional ties they have to these imagined relationships. I attribute this to the intrinsic desire to

be connected with other human beings (Ryan and Deci 2000), which is stressed by the destruction of traditional

social ties characteristic of modernity (Beck 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001; Giddens 1991). The need for

relatedness is also at odds with impersonal, bureaucratic institutions that replace traditional networks and the

subsequent justifying neoliberal logic of self-sufficiency and its ideal of individual success. In response to these

competing compulsions and the overarching mood of uncertainty, a number of Silva's (2013) participants joined

the military for its rigidity and routine, from which they derived comfort, security, and community (p. 42).

However, Silva connects two poles when she writes that on the whole, "experiences of powerlessness, confusion,

and betrayal within the labor market, institutions such as education and the government, and the family teach

young working-class men and women that they are completely alone, responsible for their own fates, and

dependent on outside help only at their peril" (p. 9). This aversion to dependence based on historic

disappointment is incommensurate with the need for connectedness. Vornanen et al. (2009) calls this the

"paradoxical nature" of close interpersonal relationships: relationships "make security possible" but come with

"various risk factors, threat and insecurity" (p. 410). For instance, domestic violence "involves a fierce sense of

insecurity in the basic unit of security" (p. 410). Giddens (1991) suggests that "powerlessness experienced in a

personal relationship may be psychologically more damaging and consequential than powerlessness felt in

relation to more encompassing social systems" (p. 193). When navigating existing relationships is made more

difficult and confusing as a result of uncertain dynamics such as changing gender expectations or individual versus collective responsibility, it makes sense that reality shifters would use shifting to imagine relationships that are stable, emotionally fulfilling, and—not least of all—under their control.

Conceptions of Home

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) posit that "individualization means disembedding without re-embedding" (p. 21). In creating their desired realities, reality shifters embed themselves within communities, be it Hogwarts or the Avengers. This desire to belong is frequently described as a longing for "home." The conceptualization of home is apt when considering the nostalgia of many of the believed fantasy worlds that are appropriated for shifters' desired realities. The feeling of nostalgia has been understood as a "longing for home" (Sedikides 2015:208). In Vornanen et al.'s (2009) study of teenagers' definitions of insecurity, answers included "there is no home" and "there is no proper home or caring parents" (p. 411). In the TikTok and Reddit data, there are 17 posts with explicit references to home, with phrases like "I'm going home now," "I'M GOING HOME TODAY YOU ALL," and "They're waiting for you. Go home." A TikTok account shares, "I manifested that all of our followers are going home where they belong."

Platonic and Familial Relationships

A shifter's desired reality presents an opportunity to create, mend, or relive formative relationships. One shifter (whose age appeared to be an outlier) explained that her favorite desired reality is her childhood, where she scripts she will see her mother, father, and brother, who are all now deceased: "I wanted to go back, be a kid for a while, and be with the family members I miss." Another shifter recalls her shifting experience in which she sees her teacher of five years who had died in her current reality last year. The relationships between children and parents are especially fraught in the teenage years. One shifter "scripted and had supportive parents for once." Another shifter's script reveals that she scripted her desired reality parents "are never strict or controlling. They let me go out, have sleepovers…They know about my online friends and let me fly out to see them…" Such warm

and mutualistic relationships are also extended to broader social relationships. In a line too specific to not be inspired directly from the shifter's life, the same user writes "My parents are not religious or judgemental in any way, shape, or form." The desire for tolerance and acceptance of the self is also extended to others on a societal scale when shifters script the absence of homophobia, racism, colorism, etc.

Even imagined experiences with fictional characters tend to take on a quality of realism that indicates what shifters feel they are missing in their current realities. A TikTok reads "POV: YOU'RE AT A SLYTHERIN PARTY," use "both headphones for best experience!" and pairs Harry Potter scenes with snippets of popular songs for an immersive experience. A Reddit post promises that with reality shifting, "you could be dancing at the yule ball at Hogwarts, training at bnha [Boku No Hero Academia], playing truth or dare with your comfort characters, LITERALLY ANYTHING!" Longing for school, parties, and truth-or-dare are all symptoms of an arrested teenagehood and unfulfilled desire for company. Further, in nearly every role-play or skit, the reality shifters keep their status as a shifter hidden, instead acting as if they have been there the whole time—which, for the characters in that reality, they have been and are an adored friend or lover. The caveat to this rule, of course, is that Marvel's Doctor Strange knows about reality shifting. Still, this can be used to the shifter's enjoyment and fulfillment. One TikTok splices together movie scenes to show Doctor Strange announcing, "ok people tomorrow morning 8.am y/n's shift[ing] back here" and Thor, The Falcon, Wanda, Spiderman, Loki, and Hawk Eye smile and cheer. These narratives all reflect a desire for belonging and embeddedness in social life, as well as the emotional reciprocation of a hitherto unreciprocated relationship with a beloved fictional world and its characters. This desire is exemplified by the question of one Redditor: "Is that misinformation [about reality shifting] really gonna stop you from cuddling with your s/o in your DR, or making memories with your friends?" Other picturesque scenarios include stargazing on a hill or riding the Hogwarts Express. The feeling of belonging realized by shifting is euphoric: a shifter exclaims, "IT FEELS LIKE I FINALLY BELONG SOMEWHERE, AFTER COUNTLESS DAYS OF THINKING THERE IS

NOWHERE I COULD BELONG WHENEVER I GO THERE I FEEL SO WELCOMED AND SAFE.

THE PEOPLE THERE MAKE ME FEEL LOVED!!!!! AND WANTED!!!!!"

Intimacy and Sex

How and why has reality shifting become an outlet for romantic and sexual desires for the people who practice it? Practically, against the backdrop of broader trends of decreasing sexual activity among adolescents and teenagers (Lehman 2020), COVID-19 presumably further curbed sexual behavior as young people quarantined in their family home. Absent in the data are references to other sexual behaviors, such as the use of pornography or sexting, but the practice of reality shifting in lieu or in addition to other practices attests to its fulfillment of a certain need. While true of all interpersonal relationships, sex is a particularly unique juncture where the clashing of self/other, control/loss of control, and independence/dependence is heightened. These tensions are thought to be negotiated by sexual partners alone, but they are also highly influenced by external circumstances. Reality shifting allows shifters control over their sexual encounters and thus presents an escape from various concerns and confusion about sex and double standards, which manifest in interpersonal interaction, threats to safety, and mainstream portrayals of sex.

Multiple reality shifting methods and tips for reality shifting presuppose the shifter's aim of comfort and touch. Reddit posts advise "cuddling a pillow and pretending it's your comfort character" and to "spray it with perfume/cologne that you think they'd use" or "fold a weighted blanket across your chest to give the feeling of someone's arm over you" and "softly play music as background noise or breathing or a heartbeat." This method is akin to the "heartbeat method" explained by one TikTok video which employs similar techniques of cuddling a pillow and using a heartbeat audio found on YouTube as if you're "laying on someone's chest from your DR." Another method—"In your arms method"—also requires a large pillow, the repetition of the affirmation "I am shifting into _____'s arms" and imagining "walking into their arms and feeling comfortable, safe, happy, and imagine how they feel, smell." Another post encourages listening to subliminal stimuli while

imagining "staring into the eyes of your soulmate" and using a visualization method of picturing "your first kiss in your DR." A TikTok implores, "How does it feel to hug them?" An extremely popular Reddit post in r/shiftingrealities shares how one shifter fills up a latex glove with warm water to simulate the feeling of holding hands while they try to shift. These instances reveal the desire for connection in a time of loneliness, particularly physical touch and other sensory experiences.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) take up the changing and often contradictory mores of sexuality and relationships that put pressure on women's individualization. While sex has left the realm of the taboo, the "contours of new values [are] still blurred and uncertain" (p. 79). Mass media and modern educational theory's normalization of youth sexuality is still resisted by churches and other traditional cultures. Together, today's youth are given conflicting messages about sex, including "warnings and contradictory advice were given about contraception and health risks; demands for new standards in sexual behaviour, or new competitive pressures to perform, often threw young people (who [are] especially dependent on outside recognition) into a state of disorientation and uncertainty" (p. 80). Within the family, parents may avoid the topic of sex entirely, neither permitting nor forbidding it. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim posit that women's "liberalization" has also subjected girls and women to more sexual demands from sexual partners and peer groups. Sexual "autonomy" becomes a new form of heteronomy (and heteronormativity) and "new freedom" becomes a new compulsion (p. 89). The expectation of women's sexual availability and inconsequential sex, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim assert, frees men from responsibility more than ever before, and ambiguous expectations around contraception make sexual encounters fraught with uncertainty. It is still women who assume greater risks: of bad reputation, of health problems and side effects of contraception, and of unwanted pregnancy (p. 90). Misunderstandings and mistakes "weigh most heavily upon the woman and force her into difficult balancing acts, confusing and often overtaxing her if she is young and inexperienced" (p. 90-91). In this way, women's individualization extends to her sexuality, but her choices are laden with risk.

Similarly, Giddens (1992) contends that "personal life has become an open project, creating new demands and anxieties" (p. 8). The desire for "tenderness and intimacy is closely bound up with 'if', 'from when' and 'how far' questions, with the confusion of feelings, desires, fears and doubts. Girls are thus left more to their own devices. Without a strict 'no' imposed from outside, they must increasingly find their own rules and behaviour" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001:90).

Reality shifters' motivations for shifting for intimacy are brought to light as they recount disillusionment with romance and sex in their current realities. In *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Giddens (1992) observes that:

> By their late teens, many of the girls have already had experience of unhappy love affairs, and are well aware that romance can no longer be equated with permanence. In a highly reflexive society they come into contact with, and in their television watching and reading actively search out, numerous discussions about sex, relationships and influences affecting the position of women. The fragmentary elements of the romantic love complex with which these girls are grappling in seeking to take practical control of their lives. (P. 52)

Giddens argues that women seek to take control of their lives and their sexual lives and cites an attraction to media like books and television that are central to reality shifting for many shifters. One TikToker admits "I'm just not attracted to anyone in this reality," to which their friend replies "You can't date fictional characters!" You can, the user points out, if you shift. On the other hand, a TikTok skit references limitations imposed by parents: "My parents: Don't you dare get a boyfriend Reva! Me: Gets a boyfriend in a different reality." A similar TikTok skit tells how the shifter's parents think she is "innocent" and does not understand dirty jokes. On the contrary, she points to Harry Potter TikTok for her sexual knowledge and her desired reality for her sexual experience, where she says she is "no longer a virgin." (Another TikTok asks, "Shifters: Technically if I lose my virginity in my DR I don't lose it in my CR, right?"). Similar sentiment can be found in TikToks that say, "look its the person who acts all innocent but imagines getting railed against a wall by a fictional character at least 15 times a day," "Thinking about getting railed by Draco," or "oh yeah I've never had sex (in this reality) i would

never do drugs! (in this reality)." These proclamations speak to the societal expectations of girls to be innocent and "pure," which they may find stifling as they desire experimentation with sex or substances. In their desired realities, they are practicing controlled deviance. They sometimes resist or subvert norms, though in an inconsequential way. Their current realities do not afford such experimentation because the risks associated with mistakes are high. What reality shifting and the reality shifting community offers is the opportunity to reclaim their sexuality and express such desires without judgment.

Giddens posits that "sex is risk and pleasure" (1992:126). Sexual desire is tempered by fears about navigating sexual relationships. Yet, what if all risk could be neutralized? Sexual desires find a home in reality shifting because shifters control all sexual encounters in their desired realities, which is crucial because as Beck (1992, 2001, 2014) and Giddens (1992) posit, the realm of intimate relationships is also made uncertain and risky under modernity. In particular, women grapple with sexual agency and control over their intimate relationships during the stalled sexual revolution (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Giddens (1992) explains that "Many women know they are not getting equal emotional support, esteem or respect in their relationships" (p. 48). Silva (2013), too, notes that young people see relationships as liabilities and sources of tension over housework, gender obligations, and money (p. 55). As girls and women feel more entitled to engage in sexual behavior at the time and age they choose and resist male sexual dominance, personal life becomes ground for contestation between partners (Giddens 1992). Even when women voice their desires, their partners may override them. Bay-Cheng (2019) explains that "Sexual disregard and exploitation are also enabled by material and sociopolitical inequities that undercut women's leverage while boosting men's (e.g., wage and labor discrimination, restrictions on women's access to reproductive and sexual health care, systematic discrediting and obstruction of women's claims of sexual violation)" (p. 467). Concerningly, Giddens (1992) argues that "as that control starts to break down, we see the compulsive character of male sexuality more plainly revealed— and this declining control also generates a rising tide of male violence towards women" (p. 3). Byers, O'Sullivan, and

Brotto (2016) found that young people avoid sexual and/or romantic encounters for myriad personal reasons, including lack of enjoyment, negative emotions, fear of negative outcomes, and negative physical experience (Byers, O'Sullivan, and Brotto 2016). In Byers et al.'s (2016) study of avoidance in sexually-experienced adolescents, significantly more female adolescents than male adolescents reported sexual and romantic avoidance, and female adolescents who avoided sexual activity were more likely to have experienced sexual coercion. The researchers' ultimate interpretation of this data is that selective avoidance of intimacy is an exercise of agency. Scripting intimacy into a desired reality is an extension of this agency because the encounters are completely in control of the shifter and therefore associated with positive emotions, and without unwanted outcomes or unwanted physical experiences.

Flirtatious role-play between the shifter and their comfort characters abounds on TikTok. The skits romanticize both suave and confident interactions and awkward and stumbling ones. Most take place during routine activities like school (even if it is wizarding school). School represents the environment where young people spend most of their time, second only to the home. Its familiarity, however, was denied to students when the pandemic forced schools to move online and relegated students to their homes and away from their classmates, friends, and crushes. TikTok user @jess__malfoy is a prolific creator of such roleplays and boasts a relatively high production value. One series of videos captioned "#pov you're sitting next to Draco in class," "#pov you're in Divination class with Fred," "#pov you're in potions class with Harry," and the like, exhibits tender and flirtatious moments. For these videos, @jess__malfoy commissions an anonymous male partner to roleplay with her; the two stand next to each other in black cloaks and with their faces out of frame, leaving their identities up to the imagination of the viewer (assumably for the viewer to project themselves or their desired reality self alongside the specified character). With props like books, wands, and potion ingredients and a romantic, emotional soundtrack, the two figures follow a similar plot in each video of working together, teasing one another, passing notes, and finally holding hands and other tender touching. Similar role-plays by other

creators use scenarios typical of teenage years, including games of truth-or-dare, which are rife with romantic

and sexual tensions and encounters.

Reality shifters' concerns about sexual activity and its consequences reflect the female body as an object

of personal concern and political contestation. References to sexual desirability and performance in scripting

ideas include "my [cat emoji] tastes like pineapple," "always shaved," "gorilla grip," "no gag reflex," "attractive

moans," "good at that gluck gluck 3000" (fellatio), and "you have that WAP" ("wet-ass pussy" as popularized by

musician Cardi B). The politicization of the female body is revealed in the highly common concern of

unintended pregnancy, with shifters advising others to "script that you can't get pregnant (unless you want to)."

Pregnancy is one of the major risks of sexual activity as access to abortion remains uneven and in flux, in addition

to the stigma that both teenage pregnancy and abortion carry.

While young women desire their own physical and emotional safety during sex, they also want it for

their partners. A frequently-asked-questions informational Reddit post reads,

> Can I script that I'm dating someone, or would that be forcing them? Yes, you can. No, you aren't
> forcing them. When you script your relationship, all you're doing is scripting that you're going to a
> reality where you're in a relationship with this person. It isn't forcing them; it's a reality where you're
> already together.

This question reveals concerns about coercion and consent. This extends to behavior inside the relationship: A

TikTok warns, "If you are going to be in a relationship with [Draco] PLEASE DON'T CHEAT ON HIM TO

GET ATTENTION. It will break his heart. Remember they are real people, not some toy."

A surprising finding in TikTok roleplays was the apparent scripting of conflicts that would ostensibly

cause emotional distress. Some scenarios made more sense than others, for instance, "me practicing how to

pretty scream bc I scripted to be tortured and my lover saves me," which follows a familiar narrative that is

considered the epitome of romance. A similar, albeit far more commonplace situation, is chronicled in a TikTok

captioned "#pov Draco comforts you when you're having a panic attack." A masculine voice says, "It's alright

darling, come here" and the video shows a person with their head in their hands and "Draco" embraces them and strokes their hair. A direct inverse of this situation was also referenced; it recommended playing an audio recording of sobbing on a phone and putting it under a pillow so "you will feel like you are lying on Draco's chest while he cries." Other skits deal with cheating and jealousy with various emotional responses portrayed by the shifter, from distress to sneaky satisfaction. The latter is exemplified in a TikTok that says "me when I script I get cheated on and it actually works" with audio of a sarcastic "wow!" Many other TikToks do indulge the emotional hurt of such scenarios. However, as the previously mentioned TikTok makes clear, this drama has all been scripted by the shifter and they ultimately wield the power to shape the sequence of events. The shifters are in control of situations in the desired reality that would make them feel powerless in their current reality. Perhaps this practice is also an exercise to preemptively work through complicated emotions of romantic relationships, trust, and betrayal. Giddens (1992) might consider such events as part of a "quest-romance" that is "painful and anxiety-ridden in many respects" but "is nevertheless an active process of engagement with future time" (p. 51). In many ways, reality shifters practice relationships that will have in the future and in this practice are able to locate their own desires and emotional needs.

Giddens (1992) proposes that purposeful sexual fantasies can subvert norms and provide an escape from the oppressive distinctions of active/passive, masculine/feminine, or dominant/submissive (p. 123). Shifters appear to desire sex that is cooperative, communicative, and committed, which is a model of Giddens' confluent love, an "ethical framework for the fostering of non-destructive emotion" (p. 202). On the other hand, Bay-Cheng (2015b) finds in her studies that young women's sexual agency is coopted by a neoliberal ethic so that they conceive of their agency as "personal freedom that conceals the constant strategizing, divisive status jockeying, and relentless self-surveillance entailed" in retaining agency, and even the supposed liberated sexuality of commercialized feminism is "rigidly scripted according to a canned technology of sexiness" (p. 288). Navigating sexuality becomes a "minefield" of "defensive and offensive maneuvers" to protect against judgment,

sexual coercion, sexual assault, etc. all "without jeopardizing their status as agents" (p. 286). Overall, young women desire intimate connections and sex but not at the price of their agency. What sex in a desired reality ensures, then, is the realization of both intimacy and agency simultaneously.

•·₃·∘ ☽ ✧⟨⟨∘·ร··• CONCLUSION

The consideration of reality shifting in the current study took a uses and gratifications approach and therefore largely avoided passing value judgments on the benefits or harmfulness of reality shifting. Is reality shifting a healthy outlet for imaginative world-building, exploring selfhood and desire, raising self-esteem, and meeting unfulfilled psychological needs, or is it a desperate coping mechanism that unmoors shifters from reality and thus bleeds into the pathological? A final finding from the data that may speak to the intensity of reality shifting is the desire for some reality shifters to *respawn* or *permashift*, which is to leave the current reality permanently. The r/shiftingrealities forum moderators flag posts about respawning with trigger warnings because of the implication of suicide if one's consciousness is to leave this reality forever. While some shifters are wary of talk of respawning ("Q: Can I stay in my DR forever? A: Yes, but I don't recommend it," "We do not encourage or endorse respawning"), others post about respawning excitedly or with resolute resignation. One user writes, "Goodbye! I'm going to permanently shift now...I feel in my heart that I'm finally going home today. Bye everyone, and thank you all for the amazing time I had here!" A similar post reads, "I'm shifting to a different reality that's similar to mine, but much better overall. I'm gonna stay there forever, like not coming back to this reality. I know that it's possible and I'm actually really excited to shift!" Someone else writes more solemnly: "I write this post with the purpose to help guide shifters in this community before I permanently shift by 2022." Other posts animatedly insist that respawning is not the same thing as killing yourself: "respawning is the act of completely severing your ties with your OR. That isn't death... if someone doesn't feel like this reality is their home let them go to another! We have a right to be happy. Stop policing everyone else's experiences." Respawning in particular prompts concern about the seriousness of reality shifting and its potential pathology. Some of the theorists cited in this study have opinions on adaptive versus maladaptive practices. Giddens (1991) describes an experience that sounds uncannily like reality shifting, but warns it becomes pathological when

"agency is withdrawn from the body and attached to a fantasy world of narrative biography, separated from the intersecting of the imaginary and the reality principle upon which ordinary social activity depends" and "self-identity is no longer integrated" with daily life (p. 60). One lone TikTok video captured in the data tried to spread awareness about maladaptive daydreaming, a disorder not clinically recognized but thought to be a coping mechanism in response to trauma, abuse, or loneliness (Tapu 2016). Horton and Wohl (1956), the psychologists behind parasocial relationships, reason:

> Nothing could be more reasonable or natural than that people who are isolated and lonely should seek sociability and love wherever they think they can find it. It is only when the parasocial relationship becomes a substitute for autonomous social participation, when it proceeds in absolute defiance of objective reality, that it can be regarded as pathological. (P. 223)

Wulf et al. (2021), the authors of the study of nostalgic media use and escapism during COVID-19, propose that escapism may be dysfunctional—preventing or distracting from existing problems—or functional—in pursuit of positive experiences and emotions (p. 3). According to the central argument of this paper, reality shifting has qualities of both: escaping crisis and realizing desire. Further research and specifically longitudinal data on this new phenomenon is necessary to reveal the long-term consequences for reality shifters. Notably, this might include the psychological effect of pursuing reality shifting but never having the subjective experience of obtaining it, as appears to be common in the community (though the data reveal that people continued to try after months of no success). Would this disappointment lead to a rejection of shifting and an acceptance of their current reality or increased pessimism or nihilism towards the real world? And for the young people who do experience shifting, how long will they maintain the practice? Do they continue to engage with their current reality or disengage from it in favor of their desired reality?

Another line of inquiry into reality shifting may take a fandom studies approach (see Duffet 2013) and further explore popular culture, online community, and the role of media, narrative, and nostalgia. This approach might consider the similarities and differences between reality shifting and fan fiction, role-playing

games, cosplaying, and other active engagement with media and fantasy. With many crossovers with reality

shifting and its indulgence of parasocial relationships, Duffet (2013) explains that media fandom is "the

recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection" with an element of popular culture

(p. 2). In the same way that reality shifters fashion the knowledge-boundaries of reality shifting and use it to

realize their selfhood, Duffet argues that fans are autodidacts and fanship is a "parallel process of activity and

identity" (p. 26).

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first sociological exploration of reality shifting, and the second

academic treatment of the phenomenon after Somer et al.'s (2021) paper on reality shifting's phenomenology

and connections to psychology, which was published during writing.

By applying risk society, individualization, and neoliberal commercialized feminism to the data on

reality shifters' accounts of their experiences, I have found that the direness of the current reality drives shifters

to the promises of a new reality. This new reality is tailored to the individual shifter's particular desires, but

commonalities between desired realities reveal concerns shared between shifters as young people and as young

women. First, they construct an idealized self, often defined by beauty, intelligence, ability, and success.

Second, shifters imagine relationships, which are defined by belongingness, intimacy, sex, and physical and

emotional pleasure, and are where the intimate and emotional connections of parasocial relationships can be

experienced. What links these two domains of desire is the wielding of agency to create a stable, predictable

desired reality in reaction to the current reality that is defined by uncertainty. The preeminence of agency as

necessitated by individualization and neoliberalism, however, seems to limit reality shifters to reproduce

dynamics that do not challenge the fundamental inequalities that govern society.

Bude (2018) wrote, "with judicious scepticism and watchful reserve, the future generation seeks new

openings in a world of diminishing space and elapsing time. There is no place on the planet left untouched

where one might build a new world" (p. 161). The metaphorical reading of his statement—that speaks to the

compulsion of individualization under the existential threat of life in risk society—is paired with a literal reading: ecological destruction is making the planet uninhabitable. For young women, looming global threats are the backdrop to the everyday decisions and interactions that are similarly defined by risk and uncertainty. Despite such crises—or rather, because of them—young women seek emotional experiences, intimacy, and fulfillment from fantasy media worlds. Bude could not have fathomed that the future generation would transcend this reality to build new worlds from their bedrooms.

References

Bay-Cheng, Laina Y. 2012. "Recovering Empowerment: De-personalizing and Re-politicizing Adolescent Female Sexuality." *Sex Roles* 66:713–717. doi: 10.1007/s11199-011-0070-x.

Bay-Cheng, Laina Y. 2015a. "Living in Metaphors, Trapped in a Matrix: The Ramifications of Neoliberal Ideology for Young Women's Sexuality." *Sex Roles* 73(7-8):332–339. doi: 10.1007/s11199-015-0541-6.

Bay-Cheng, Laina Y. 2015b. "The Agency Line: A Neoliberal Metric for Appraising Young Women's Sexuality." *Sex Roles* 73:279–291. doi: 10.1007/s11199-015-0452-6.

Bay-Cheng, Laina Y. and Sara A. Goodkind. 2016. "Sex and the Single (Neoliberal) Girl: Perspectives on Being Single Among Socioeconomically Diverse Young Women. *Sex Roles* 74(5–6):181–194. doi: 10.1007/s11199-015-0565-y.

Bay-Cheng, Laina Y. 2019. "Agency Is Everywhere, but Agency Is Not Enough: A Conceptual Analysis of Young Women's Sexual Agency." *Annual Review of Sex Research Special Issue* 462–474. doi: 10.1080/00224499.2019.1578330

Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity.* London: Sage.

Beck, Ulrich, and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. 2001. *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, SAGE Publication. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, retrieved April 22, 2022 (http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vcl/detail.action?docID=254692).

Beck, Ulrich. 2014. *Ulrich Beck: Pioneer in Cosmopolitan Sociology and Risk Society*. Springer.

Beck, Ulrich, Wolfgang Bonss, and Christoph Lau. 2003. "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization: Problematic, Hypotheses and Research Programme." *Theory, Culture & Society* 20(2):1–33.

Blumler, Jay G., and Elihu Katz. 1974. *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Bude, Heinz. 2018. *The Mood of the World*. Translated by Simon Garnett. Massachusetts: Polity Press.

Byers, E. Sandra, Lucia F. O.Sullivan, and Lori A. Brotto. 2016. "Time Out from Sex or Romance: Sexually Experienced Adolescents' Decisions to Purposefully Avoid Sexual Activity or Romantic Relationships." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 45(5):831–845. doi: 10.1007/s10964-016-0447-9.

Chauvin, Bruno, Daniele Hermand, and Etienne Mullet. 2008. "New Age Beliefs and Societal Risk Perception." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 38(8):2056–2071.

Duffet, Mark. 2013. *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Frisk, Liselotte, and Peter Nynäs. 2012. "Characteristics of Contemporary Religious Change: Globalization, Neoliberalism, and Interpretative Tendencies." Pp. 47–70 in *Post-secular Society*, edited by P. Nynäs, M. Lassander, and T. Utriainen. New York: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781315127095.

Furlong, Andy. 2008. "The Japanese Hikikomori Phenomenon: Acute Social Withdrawal Among Young People." *The Sociological Review* 56(2):309–325. doi: /10.1111/j.1467-954X.2008.00790.x.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1992. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. California: Stanford University Press.

Gieryn, Thomas F. 1999. *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-face Behavior.* Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Goodkind, Sara. 2009. "'You Can Be Anything You Want, but You Have to Believe It': Commercialized Feminism in Gender-specific Programs for Girls." *Signs* 34(2), 397–422. doi: 10.1086/591086.

Green, Melanie C., Timothy C. Brock, and Geoff F. Kaufman. 2004. "Understanding Media Enjoyment: The Role of Transportation into Narrative Worlds." *Communication Theory* 14(4):311–327.

Horton, Donald, and Richard R. Wohl. 1956. "Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance." *Psychiatry (Washington, D.C.)* 19(3):215–229.

Isberner, Maj-Britt, Tobias Richter, Constanze Schreiner, Yanina Eisenbach, Christin Sommer, and Markus Appel. 2019. "Empowering Stories: Transportation into Narratives with Strong Protagonists Increases Self-related Control Beliefs." *Discourse Processes* 56(8):575-598. doi: 10.1080/0163853X.2018.1526032.

Kim, Janna L., C. Lynn Sorsoli, Katherine Collins, Bonnie A. Zylbergold, Deborah Schooler, and Deborah L. Tolman. 2007. "From Sex to Sexuality: Exposing the Heterosexual Script on Primetime Network Television." *The Journal of Sex Research* 44(2):145–57. (http://www.jstor.org/stable/25701753).

Kuo, Andrew, Richard J. Lutz, and Jacob L. Hiler. 2016. "Brave New World of Warcraft: A Conceptual Framework for Active Escapism." *The Journal of Consumer Marketing* 33(7), 498–506. doi: 10.1108/JCM-04-2016-1775.

Lehman, Charles F. 2020. "Fewer American High Schoolers Having Sex Than Ever Before." *Institute for Family Studies*, retrieved April 22, 2022. (https://ifstudies.org/blog/fewer-american-high-schoolers-having-sex-than-ever-before).

Manjoo, Farhad. 2008. *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-fact Society*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Mythen, Gabe. 2004. *Ulrich Beck: A Critical Introduction to the Risk Society*. London: Pluto Press.

Reizer, Abira, Yifat Munk, and Lotem Katz Frankfurter. 2022. "Laughing All the Way to Lockdown: On Humor, Optimism, and Well-being during COVID-19." *Personality and Individual Differences* 184. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2021.111164.

Ryan, Richard M. and Deci, Edward L. 2000. "Self-determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-being. *American Psychologist* 55(1):68–78.

Scharff, Christina. 2011. "Disarticulating Feminism: Individualization, Neoliberalism and the Othering of 'Muslim Women.' *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 18(2):119–134. doi: 10.1177/1350506810394613.

Sedikides, Constantine, Tim Wildschut, Clay Routledge, Jamie Arndt, Erica G. Hepper, and Xinyue Zhou. 2015. "To Nostalgize: Mixing Memory with Affect and Desire." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 51:189–273.

Silva, Jennifer M. 2013. *Coming Up Short: Working-class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty.* Oxford University Press.

Silver, Nathan, and Michael D. Slater. 2019. "A Safe Space for Self-expansion: Attachment and Motivation to Engage and Interact with the Story World." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36(11–12):3492–3514.

Sjöberg, Lenart, and Anders af Wahlberg. 2002. "Risk Perception and New Age Beliefs." *Risk Analysis* 22(4):751–764.

Somer, Eli, Etzel Cardeña, Ramiro Figueiredo Catelan, and Nirit Soffer-Dudek. 2021. "Reality Shifting: Psychological Features of an Emergent Online Daydreaming Culture." *Current Psychology*. doi: 10.1007/s12144-021-02439-3.

Stip, Emmanuel, Alexis Thibault, Alexis Beauchamp-Chatel, and Steve Kisely. 2016. "Internet Addiction, *Hikikomori* Syndrome, and the Prodromal Phase of Psychosis." *Psychiatry* 7. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2016.00006.

Tapu, Maria. 2016. "Maladaptive Daydreaming." *The Psychologist* 29:886–893.

Virtue, Doreen, and Lynnette Brown. 2009. *Angel Numbers: the Angels Explain the Meaning of 111, 444, and Other Numbers in Your Life*. California: Hay House, Inc.

Vornanen, Riitta, Maritta Törrönen, and Pauli Niemelä. 2009. "Insecurity of Young People: The Meaning of Insecurity as Defined by 13–17-year-old Finns." *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research* 17(4), 399–419. doi: 10.1177/110330880901700404.

Wulf, Tim, Johannes S. Breuer, and Josephine B. Schmitt. 2021. "Escaping the Pandemic Present: The Relationship Between Nostalgic Media Use, Escapism, and Well-being During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Psychology of Popular Media.* Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/ppm0000357.