

The Purpose of Norm Breaking

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The Purpose of Breaking Norms

As a young student, I occasionally cut up but usually did what I was told. One day, I drew a rocket launcher on an upright canvas with a red marker; no one knew what it was until I said it, and all the students were concerned; the teacher got involved and said, “Kaleb, you can’t do that.” Why not? I just did it. Yeah, it was a weapon drawn that could promote violence, but it was an excellent drawing; at the very least, an accolade would be appreciated for my artistic ability, but my reward was a phone call home. The question, “Why am I not allowed to do certain things?” has bounced around my head since then. This incident, which has been long since, has inspired my research project in the humanities. I have looked for figures in a similar situation of being denied what they’re capable of and having a standard or norm already in place for them. Research leads to the conclusion that people want to break norms because they feel limited in what they can do instead of having the options to fulfill their potential. It becomes imperative to understand why people violate social norms when looked at more closely because they are typically regarded in a negative light instead of being praised for their individuality. Therefore, social psychologists state that “people may consciously deviate from the norm because they consider it wrong, because they feel above it, or because they want to be at odds with it” (qtd. in Gomila and Paluck 7). The aforementioned conditions serve as the perimeters for examining societal instances of norm-breaking pertaining to race, gender, and fashion, and those with disabilities.

Race

Hidden Figures

A deviancy is a form of norm-breaking. This type of norm-breaking comes in the form of those who expressly consider the societal standard to be wrong. Since “less work documents why deviants end up in this situation in the first place, deviance remains a psychological question mark” to not only psychologists studying this subject but society as a whole (qtd. In Gomila and Paluck 3). These people play a role in a society that usually portrays them as the “black sheep.” Gomila and Paluck observe that “Additionally, deviating from a norm leads to being stereotyped, identifying less with the group, and negatively impacts the deviant’s self-esteem and well-being” (4). Thus, one is led to believe that being a norm-breaker rarely, if ever, results in a positive outcome.

Often seen as an embarrassment because they are different & “worthless” from the rest, these individuals tend to drift to the fringes of society. However, occasionally, as seen in history, these norm-breakers become leaders for social justice and ignite the spark needed for these restrictions to change. An example of such historical impacts can be seen in the movie *Hidden Figures*, which discusses the topic of combating racial stereotypes against black folks, especially women. Katherine Goble, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan, three brilliant black women, starting from prodigies to becoming mathematicians at NASA, are working on sending a rocket into space. Though they all got the job, it was difficult for their white coworkers to acknowledge them as people worthy of even being in the same room. This movie explores the struggles of colored women and their place in society: “Every time we get a chance to get ahead, they move the finish line. Every time” (Monáe). According to sociologists, “Deviant play important roles in social groups, so much so that scholars have long argued that healthy societies need deviants”

(Durkheim) (qtd. in Gomila and Paluck 3). Resonating with the idea that deviants do not just have to play the black sheep but can use their beliefs and strengths to cause a healthy pushback in society. On the one hand, they “clarify the group’s boundaries, improve the group’s decisions, and strengthen cohesion among group members-” and can “disrupt existing norms and catalyze change,” which is the role these deviants had (qtd. in Gomila and Paluck 3). The women acknowledge the role they play in this game & in order to play their role, sacrifices were necessary. The ladies put their lives, families, and their jobs on the line. The purpose of the film brings to light the sacrifices one has to make for the greater good and it’s a risk that is only achieved through stepping up, even when no one else is. They’re doing one thing right, and that is isolating themselves and leaving a mark in society.

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

Similarly, Ralph Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man* features a protagonist who is constantly shown new surroundings every chance there is, and from there, he tries to find his true self and have people see him for who he truly is, not just some black man. However, while the narrator is trying to find his place in the world, Dr. Bledsoe explains to the protagonist that he’s invisible: ““You’re a nobody, son. You don’t exist—can’t you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think—except men like me. I tell them”” (Ellison 112). In this scene, the narrator is directly told for the first time of his invisibility. Despite his invisibility, Dr. Bledsoe tells him that he is the “exception to the rule” and has found a way to execute power over white people. In this instance, Dr. Bledsoe presents himself as a norm-breaker. Dr. Bledsoe thus represents a deviant that considers himself above societal norms as Golima and Paluck suggest is one the three main reasons a person breaks a norm. What, then, does this say about the narrator of Ellison’s novel?

Although it may seem simple, the narrator's story takes place in racist America, and it would be more of a struggle to have people see him for who he is because they only see race and judge the character based on skin first. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator suggests that people can see him but choose not to: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 3). In this instance, the reader has yet to discover any distinguishing characteristics, including gender and race, of the narrator. Instead, the reader must rely on societal norms as a way of context. To that end, the Prologue includes further details that allow the reader to reach a conclusion pertaining to the narrator's identity:

When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality (Ellison 3).

Context provides a reader with the idea that a person is not only seen in their physical form, but judged as well. This judgment relates to the idea that a norm-breaker considers how they are being viewed as incorrect; or at the very least, not applicable as the full picture of who they are. Since they are not being seen thoroughly it results in a push back to these restrictive view points.

For instance, at the beginning of Ellison's novel, the narrator reveals a memory of his grandfather on his deathbed. While dying, the grandfather tells the narrator that while he has been a "meek" man, it was not all for nothing, but instead to overthrow the white people with kindness. The narrator describes the story stating that his grandfather called him close and said, "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but your life is a

war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country...Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open”

(Ellison 13). This interaction can be seen as a crucial moment that sets up the narrator's idea of how he should behave in society—while a person does not always associate kindness with a dominating trait, this moment reveals otherwise. Thus, highlighting that there are in fact other ways to break norms aside from simply being aggressive or domineering. After this scene at the beginning of the novel, the reader sees the narrator's struggles for another twenty years.

Through the narrator's journey, he runs into more and more obstacles, like a Battle Royale of black men blindfolded and swinging at each other. Over the course of the description of this battle, the reader learns that “everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought for long” (Ellison 19). This experience becomes a life altering event for the narrator that continues to haunt his nightmares for the rest of the novel. Eventually the narrator retreats away from society due to all the confusion and overwhelming nature the world has to offer. His escape into his “hole” reveals his opinions on how to live life:

And I awoke in the blackness. Fully awake now, I simply lay there as though paralyzed... Later I would try to find my way out, but now I could only lie on the floor, reliving the dream...They were all up there somewhere, making a mess of the world. Well, let them. I was through and, in spite of the dream, I was whole...I could approach it[life] only from the outside, and I had been as invisible to Mary as I had been to the Brotherhood...So I would stay here until I was chased out...The end was in the beginning (Ellison 443).

The narrator fully succumbs to the quiet peace that his invisibility offers him after falling victim to taking part in an all out violent riot in the streets. However, it becomes apparent in the context

of the novel that the narrator comes to also realize the danger of invisibility: while it preempts others' attempts to define him, it also stifles his own ability to define himself. Thus, showing yet another way that a person can be a norm breaker.

Malcolm X

Malcolm X is a very controversial yet prominent figure from the Civil Rights era. Controversial because his ideals were similar to Dr Martin Luther King Jr., but the course of action he wanted was executed differently, creating a very bold line between the two and their supporters: “Malcom did not advocate for violence, he advocated self-defense. He believed that the right of self-defense is an essential element in the definition of humanity” (Cone). Malcolm has a spot on the hierarchy that shows he is against being submissive for the oppressors and instead he literally fights for his equality. This ideal is in stark contrast to Ralph Ellison’s narrator in *Invisible Man*, who at one point is determined to create an exchange of power between the races by being too submissive. Malcolm X was a norm breaker because he was expressly at odds with society’s ideas.

Malcolm X had always challenged the hypocrisy of principles in American culture referring to white people as “the worst hypocrites on the planet” (Cone). He notices whites can have the capability in recognizing their rights but black people are not allowed to, it makes them look more deranged like animals. To express his outrage, Malcolm once said, “If you want to know what I’ll do, figure out what you’ll do. I’ll do the same thing-only more of it” (Cone). What Malcolm is saying here that he has just the same right as any white person would have in any situation, but only he would use much more of it, this can be due to all of his anger being bottled in previous years and he wants those to know that he is allowed to do it according to the constitution, regardless of skin color, illuminating again that Malcolm X is explicitly at odds

with the norms he feels are placed upon him. This fervent desire to continuously “be at odds” with the societal norms grows increasingly and leads him to make bold claims towards those of white ethnicity.

Before his trip in Mecca, Malcolm X had the speculation that white people are the devil, this is due to his time living in Segregated America. Leaving for “a personal and spiritual journey” to the Middle East and West Africa, he explored the Middle East and was welcomed to a brotherhood of Islam, ranging from all colors such as a fair complexion to darker tones. They treated him with hospitality, giving him a room to sleep in, food, water, and a great talk between Malcolm and influential leaders. He listed in his autobiography “In my thirty-nine years on this earth, the Holy City of Mecca had been the first time I had ever stood before the Creator of All and felt like a complete human being” (Tristram and Nittle). Malcolm saw the standard set in other countries and his opinions changed. Ultimately, “gone was the belief in White people as exclusively evil. Gone was the call for Black separatism” (Tristram and Nittle). He referred to Middle Eastern Muslims as “sincere whites” due to their brotherly nature to all skin tones opposed to their white American counterparts.

Malcolm felt that America could be united with brotherly love just as the Middle East. However, he never cared to help white Americans realize how amicable the nation could be and, instead he insisted on portraying that the black community should be united. He left white Americans on their own to confront their pathological racism: “Let sincere whites go and teach non-violence to white people” (Tristram and Nittle). Even though his opinion changed, there was still a racial barrier between him and white America that caused Malcolm to separate and withhold the wisdom. Not in a selfish way, the way Malcolm does is it is the same saying he does not trust them enough to share information, as if they would have to prove themselves before anything

else is done.

(Fashion/Gender)

Young Thug

Young Thug (Thugger), known for his music and RICO¹ trial currently, a charge that was brought against him due to his gang involvement, further highlights the way in which he is a norm breaker. Although in the spotlight for his music, he doesn't let society determine how or what he represents or supports, this includes not conforming to gender and fashion norms of a rapper, young black man, or gang member. Therefore, Young Thugger is also recognized for his eye-catching, remarkable fashion sense. Time and time again, Young Thug has stunned the scenery by arriving with his most androgynous/bizarre outfits; his fashion sense often goes against Hip-Hop norms, especially Gangster Hip-Hop norms, originating from 1980s from the likes of Los Angeles, California. Schoolly D², Ice-T³, honorable mention being N.W.A⁴. Usually, a Hip-Hop Gangster male would dress street and present himself as a thug, acting cold and hard; however, Thug has broken that stereotype by putting a dress on for a photoshoot. This deliberate deviation from what is socially acceptable puts Young Thug in the category of someone who purposefully breaks the norm because they consider themselves above it.

It was not just a photoshoot for his 3rd studio album *Jeffery*. Thug found the dress made by Alessandro Trincone in New York and immediately needed the dress for his cover art.

Alessandro Trincone, the fashion designer who made the dress made the piece in 2016 and won the runway contest during season 7 of the VFILES⁵. Thug's associate Larmond recalled him

¹ The Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO)

² American Rapper from Philadelphia, PA

³ American rapper and actor from Newark, New Jersey. He is active in both hip hop and heavy metal

⁴ "N**gaz Wit' Attitudes" American hip hop group formed in Compton, California. They were among the earliest and most significant popularizers and controversial figures of the gangsta rap subgenres

⁵ A Foundation promoting the cultural innovations of BIPOC & LGBTQ+

saying, “I want that for the cover,” then said there wasn’t a doubt behind the thought, “He saw it and knew he wanted it” (Larmond). Thugger promoted a campaign in which he wore a kimono (female Japanese robe) made of trash bags for Adidas Original. At the time, Thug’s stylist suggested wearing a kimono of trash bags because of “his gender-breaking style.” Thug liked the idea because he thought it was “dope.” Thug’s notion of rejecting traditional gender norms gives us a look into who he is. Thug clearly shows he is different than any other rap artists’ fashion sense. *Black Twitter* is an internet community on Twitter (now called ‘X’) that primarily focuses on the issues of interest of the black community. Black Twitter had a mix of positive and negative comments, some thought of it being an embarrassment, bring down, or a way to “sissify black men.” Others thought it was groundbreaking enough that it became a movement “that sees an expansion of ideas about and portrayals of black masculinity” (Street). *The Game*⁶ was on Skee TV⁷ for an interview and freestyle when he mentioned Young Thug in his freestyle. “Since I was 10 years old, I was a young blood. These days y’all n*ggas got Young Thug. Y’all rappers wearing skirts. My rappers type of rappers to put n*ggas in a hearse” (Robertson). What he is saying here is that the current generation of rappers such as Young Thug are soft and feminine opposed to his generation of music that claims to murder people and put them in hearses. Thug is very much aware that he is a controversial figure, there are people that agree with him, and there are folks that don’t, yet the fact that he stands out amongst it is what makes him “dope.” Young Thug’s style slowly crept into fashion that can be fit for both genders or androgyny, called gender-fluidity. It’s when someone’s identity isn’t strictly male or female but changing over time, whether it’s how they look or behave, in this case, Thug’s fashion is what we call “gender-fluid.” For the 2022 *Lollapalooza*, Thugger was seen in all pink to build anticipation for his upcoming

⁶ American rapper born in Compton, California

⁷ Television show with the host DJ Skee, discussing trends and trendsetters in the world of music.

album *Punk*. For the look, he dyed his hair pink and wore all pink and a series of multiple photoshoots, even being on the cover of *Rolling Stone*: “In my world, of course, it don’t matter: You could be a gangster with a dress, or you could be a gangster with baggy pants. I feel like there’s no such thing as gender” (Reed). This is one of the many artists that pecks the boundary between fashion and tradition

Harry Styles

Similar to Young Thugger, iconic pop star Harry Styles pushes the boundaries of gender-fluidity, though Styles does it as a person who is at odds with societal norms.. Styles originates from the band *One Direction*, which was active for six years until 2015, when the members decided to go their separate ways to pursue solo careers. The abrupt end came when the band’s label owner of SYCO⁸, Simon Cowell, popular for being a judge from *Britain's Got Talent*, chose for the band to go on hiatus. One by one, each member departed. Horan, a band member, said before the hiatus that each singer “knackered and nagged” each other: “I love the band, and would never rule out anything in the future. The band changed my life, gave me everything” (Styles). Despite Styles loving the band, he was tired of making so much music with them: “We were gonna end up killing each other. We all sat down one day, had a chat, and it was like, we need to take a break. Step back, chill out, and try something new” (Styles). That said, Harry Styles is now on his own and has plenty of new things to try under the sun, as far as making an image for himself and not being known as “the guy from One-Direction” with a dress code. With the time he has to make as an independent artist, he can also establish who he really is as a person as he really has no one or an environment to influence his path as a person, rather than an artist.

⁸ British media entertainment and production company owned by British entrepreneur and record producer Simon Cowell

On the 23rd of June 2016, Styles signed up for *Columbia Records* as a solo artist, previously being signed up with his group *One Direction*. During that time, Styles was working on making his first solo music release. In May 2017, “Harry Styles debuted at No. 1 in both the United States and the United Kingdom, with the album's lead single, ‘Sign of the Times,’ hitting No. 1 on the U.K. Singles Chart and No. 4 on the Billboard Hot 100” (Wurzburger). Following the epic release, Styles was experimenting with his own type of fashion and Styles favored Gucci. For the 2015 Paris Fashion Week, Styles wore an intricately patterned, tailored Gucci suit, retro-inspired. The jacket and pants are slim cut, accessorized by ankle boots and silver finger rings. The following year, for the AMA’s⁹, Styles wore a white floral Gucci suit with flare pants, a black bolo tie, and his signature black ankle boots, still rocking the long hair. Fast forwarding to 2017, Styles had slowly begun playing with for his feature on the *TODAY* show, Styles wore a different look. Styles wore a pink suit with signature finger rings and black ankle boots. Styles



sang three songs from his upcoming solo album to build promotion during this show, singing “‘Ever Since New York,’ ‘Carolina’ and his new smash, and ‘Sign of the Times¹⁰’” (*TODAY*). Throughout 2017, Styles stuck to designer suits; however, he was experimenting with the style of the suits. He would loosen his dress shirt buttons to appear relaxed, leading away from the formal look, and wore a patterned Gucci suit during the iHeart Music Festival, equipped with a white pussybow. During the

ARIA¹¹, Styles wore a purple metallic suit with silver rings and gold boots. While there were trolls online who heavily criticized his fashion statements, the comments made on him was overwhelmingly positive “with thousands expressing their admiration for the British singer’s

⁹ American Music Awards.

¹⁰ Songs from Harry Styles’s Self-Titles album, released in 2017.

¹¹ Australian Recording Industry Association Music Awards is an annual series of awards nights celebrating the Australian music industry

willingness to wear what he wants rather than conforming to what's considered 'acceptable' (Harper).

Harry Styles went to Paris in 2018 to perform, "The pop star lit up the stage in the 'City of Lights,' wearing another custom Saint Laurent suit that sparkled from top to bottom" (Quihuiz). Styles had a low-cut blouse with his jacket left open, and he was wearing a cross necklace equipped with his silver finger rings, ultimately fully diving into gender fashion: "His style has always been extroverted; however, since leaving One Direction, Styles has taken the opportunity to hone his fluid personality" (CNC)¹². In an interview with Timothée Chamalet, Styles goes on to say it's just as masculine to have a bit of femininity: "I think there's so much masculinity in being vulnerable and allowing yourself to be feminine, and I'm very comfortable with that" (Harry Styles). Styles has no fear when it comes to being a norm breaker. In fact, he's comfortable being different. It's traditional for a man to be masculine and a woman to be feminine, however Styles found himself being comfortable switching between the two sides.

When looking at the psychological aspect of norm-breaking, it becomes apparent that Harry Styles is at odds with what society deems a "norm." His blatant resistance to wearing only male-dominant style clothing qualifies him for this aspect of norm-breaking. Being at odds with what is expected of him allows him to become influential for more than just his appearance but for his strong-minded morals and beliefs. As influential as Thug and Harry Styles' fashion statements are as artists, people with disabilities who achieved greatness are one of a kind: their determination outweighs their hardships.

¹² Condé Nast College of Fashion & Design

Disability

John River

Having a disability can impair most people's motor functions and cause them not to be able to function as a working member of society. The norm is if you have a disability, you are "less than human" (Ciência and Saúde) Because of that, they are often looked down upon, underestimated, and/or seen as "objects" and treated with impunity or exploited. They are excluded from activities such as regular classwork courses or jobs, making life much more difficult than it should, making a lot of people with a disability having to become dependent on others for income or end up in poverty. While some struggle, there are folks with a disability that give them the ability to stand out. Some folks with disabilities are really good with socializing or creativity. With these heightened abilities, they are able to pursue opportunities in those fields and become a norm breaker.

John River is an artist. One may or may not know him. I discovered his story on *Instagram* and wanted to learn more about him. John River went through it rough; he tried getting a feature with Drake, but that ultimately burned out; he even rode a bus 16 hours to see J. Cole, only to be shunned out in about 5 minutes. Just when things were already looking sad, River got a series of medical conditions like his brain fluid leaking, and some stemmed from others, like his heart condition caused by anxiety, which led to depressive episodes, temporary blindness, breathing problems, and so much more. Doctors gave him two years left, and fans were losing hope.

Three years later, River tweeted about his return and dropped "Hope City II," giving fans hope and excitement and a story of him proving everybody wrong, like his doctors, haters, and even Drake & J. Cole. Ultimately giving fans his stance on success. It's not about going and

getting the greatest offers from big-time artists, but River wants to show he could prove to people he can do it with all the world against him.

Having a disability stops most people when it comes to situations, but it doesn't prevent them from thriving in their own way of success. It may not be the ideal as the majority, but they find their own way and expand. It's amazing to see people so neglected and looked over in society make a pathway for themselves and end up probably in a better situation. It creates a difference in society and creates new boundaries for all to take advantage of. It gives everyone a lesson to explore from the experiences shared and shares unity amongst the majority and minority, giving both sides new things to learn about one another and build each other to be their best selves.

Conclusion

As initially discussed, "People may consciously deviate from the norm because they consider it wrong, because they feel above it, or because they want to be at odds with it" (qtd. in Gomila and Paluck 7). At its core, norm-breaking is fundamentally built upon a person feeling that the broken norm is wrong. Feeling above a norm simply means that one can feel they don't deserve what the current society brings. Additionally, being at odds with norms is similar to wanting to prove them wrong. As highlighted throughout the essay, there are various ways a person can break a norm, whether it be with their intelligence, their ability to overly exaggerate what is expected of them in an obtuse way of utilizing sarcasm, their fashion, their gender, music, and lastly, what society labels a "disability."

The very motive why someone would want to break away from what is considered “normal” leaves them labeled in various ways such as, a norm-breaker, a deviant, or a nonconformist. These titles aim to place individuals into a box; a box that leaves the majority of society feeling comfortable and at times, safe. However, the “rules” that are in place for society, both in the past and the present, restrict a person from following their own unique set of morals and guidelines that allow them to remain true to who they feel they are. Occasionally, if the child is lucky, they’ll have an adult figure in their life encouraging them to be who they are, whoever they want to be, no matter what that looks like—and especially if it strays from what the other kids are doing. Kudos to these adults who feel comfortable enough in their own skin to recognize the need for children and teens to determine who they are outside of what society expects them to be or inflicts upon them to become.

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