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As Harvard College’s weekly undergraduate newsmagazine, the Harvard Independent provides in-depth, critical coverage of issues and events of interest to the Harvard College community. The Independent has no political affiliation, instead offering diverse commentary on news, arts, sports, and student life.

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NEWS

Complexities and Controversies Regarding Financial Aid at Harvard

Students share their thoughts on financial aid at Harvard and its impacts on their college experiences.

By ANNA GUNKO '30

Admission to Harvard College requires immense work and rigor. Still, it does not necessarily mean a student will attend: the cost of attendance can become a barrier between a student and their dream school.

The cost of attendance at the College has increased significantly in the past three years: the Harvard Griffin Office of Financial Aid reports that the present billed cost of attendance is $91,634, while last academic year it was $86,926. In the 2024-2025 school year, it cost $82,866. Since many undergraduate households are unable to afford this hefty price tag, the College provides need-based financial aid to a large portion of each class. An estimated 25% of families recieve a full ride and pay nothing for their students' education, while 55% receive partial scholarships.

For many Harvard undergraduates, financial aid plays a crucial role in college decisions. The aid is distributed by income tier. For families with annual incomes below $100,000, Harvard covers tuition, room and board, and all other billed expenses, so the expected parent contribution is zero. For families earning between $100,000 and $200,000, aid is considered on a case-by-case basis, though the Financial Aid office will cover part of their tuition. "Financial aid as an overarching system in higher education is a crucial part of our society," Eliza Teo '30 said to the "Harvard Independent." "I think it very much makes higher education accessible, along with overall, the concept of education accessible…to the most vulnerable parts of society that would benefit the most from education."

Financial aid-related decisions start before the student even steps foot on campus, as financial aid is one of the factors students consider when choosing a campus. Brady Merrill '30, who is on financial aid, explained that his college decision was based solely on cost. "I had promised myself and my family that I would go wherever was cheapest, even if it wasn't the best school or where I wanted … just because student loans and the cost of paying for college would be more than my family could afford now or at any point in the foreseeable future," he said.

Another important consideration is the loans many students have to take out to pay for college. According to the Educational Data Initiative, 20% of students who graduate from undergraduate institutions in the United States have student debt. Only 28% of these borrowers have loans under $100,000.

"You hear about it all the time where student loans kind of loom over a person for their entire young adult life. And once they've paid off their student loans, they have a mortgage and car payments and insurance payments as well to make," Merrill, who himself is receiving full financial aid, said. "I think student loans are a big, large financial burden on a lot of young people."

However, the Griffin Financial Aid Office promises that 100% of students "can" graduate Harvard debt-free, as it offers need-based financial aid that covers 100% of demonstrated need.

This aid program is not new; the University has historically provided monetary support to enrollees since its early days as just an undergraduate institution. Back then, the school provided only meager sums, largely funded by small donations. Harvard financial aid took its modern form in 1934, when Harvard President James B. Conant '14 created the institution's first large financial aid initiative, initially called the National Scholarship Plan. It was meant not only to allow students to attend Harvard but also to make higher education more accessible beyond Harvard.

Since then, financial aid has been sponsored by Harvard donors, most of whom are alums. Notably, Kenneth C. Griffin donated $150 million to Harvard in 2015 for financial aid. After this contribution, the office was renamed the "Griffin Financial Aid Office." The program's fiscal foundation also comes from the Harvard endowment, which manages approximately 15,000 individual investments and distributed $2.6 billion in funds this year; in 2026, $777,246 of these funds were allocated toward financial aid, and in 2025, $783,674 were allocated.

"Financial aid for that reason has not only made college easier for me to afford, but has also kind of given me a head start on the rest of my life as well, as I won't need to worry about these cumbersome student loans," Merrill said.

For those attending Harvard on a full ride, aid covers winter clothing expenses, research and study abroad opportunities, and other essentials and experiences.

Although the Financial Aid office says many middle-class families earning above $200k receive financial aid, exceptions still exist. For example, if a family has atypical assets, like inherited property, they may not qualify for financial aid. This is even though tuition would cost the family a significant portion of their liquid income.

"So there are some people that have to pay a considerable amount of funds because, for example, one that I heard was that their assets were large," Merrill said. "They had a large home that they'd inherited from their grandparents, but they were a single-income family and made just over $100,000… they're paying more than another person that lives in something like a smaller home," Merrill said.

Merrill believes middle-class families often struggle most to pay for college, as they are expected to pay full tuition even though the financial burden is heavy for these groups. "I'm not claiming that if a family makes $1 million a year or something like that, that they should be receiving financial aid," he said. "But I'm also saying that just because a family makes, in Harvard's case, just over $100,000 or just over $200,000, they shouldn't pay for the full cost of living or full tuition."

Navigating the University's financial aid rules has been difficult for some students. "[I] come from a unique background where my mom is an immigrant and a single mother," Teo explained. While students whose families make less than $100,000 a year are supposed to receive a full ride at the College, Teo has paid part of her tuition despite her mother having no income. "That's been like a frustrating part of financial aid," she said. "I have a parent contribution fund and also a student contribution fund. And I've been paying both of them."

> ***"The Griffin Financial Aid Office promises that 100% of students 'can' graduate Harvard debt-free."***

The Financial Aid office notes that even though it considers assets in financial aid distributions, retirement funds should not be counted. "My mom's income is zero, and the only income that she has is from investments that she holds as an immigrant who's not getting welfare benefits," Teo explained. "So that's the only retirement funds that she has, especially with physical disabilities that prevent her from working and a lack of job experience because of her dependency on my dad, which is separate, more situation-wise than what is factually true in preventing her from getting a job."

In nuanced situations like this, the Griffin Financial Aid Office's email-dominated communication leaves undergraduates with no viable options.

"Making more financial aid resources accessible is one thing: I think one thing that kind of prevented me or discouraged me from reaching out to them more was that it's mostly email-based," Teo said. "Especially during preorientation, I was told by the financial aid officers that they didn't have in-person appointments yet. Now they do because I checked online and I met with my residential dean … I feel like providing that kind of support is important to communities in need."



Anna Gunko '30 (agunko@college.harvard.edu) is comping the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Cameron Bernier '29

Clavicular, Looksmaxxing, and the Price of Online Influence

Harvard professors and students reflect on the streamer's influence on young men, alleged criminal charges, and digital culture.

By MADI KANG '29

Braden Peters, better known as the social media influencer Clavicular, has built an online persona around pursuing physical attractiveness. Now, criminal charges in Massachusetts, which allege he raped a 17-year-old, have brought a different kind of attention to the 20-year-old streamer. Harvard researchers and students describe him as a symptom of a culture that sells insecurity back to young men, recognizing his transformation and the market that has grown around him as a harmful narrative, now popularized into a fad.

"What young men are being told through social media is that their appearance is what is most important about them," said Bryn Austin, a researcher and professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Boston Children's Hospital.

In September, Massachusetts authorities charged Peters with rape, drugging a person for sexual intercourse, and procuring alcohol for someone under 21, in connection with an alleged May 2025 incident involving a 17-year-old girl. Aleksandra Vasilevna Mendoza, known online as Alorah Ziva, told police Peters invited her to his family's home in Chatham after they connected on Instagram. According to the police account in NBC News reporting, Mendoza alleged he gave her alcohol during a livestream and that she woke to find him having intercourse with her without consent. Peters has denied the allegations, and the case is pending.

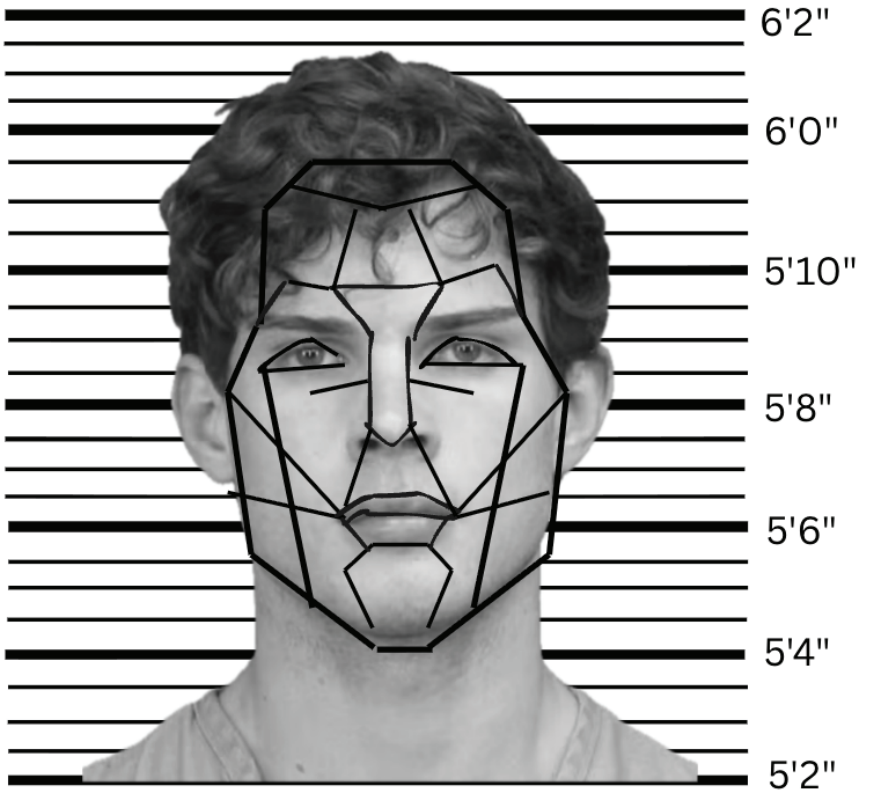
In April 2026, Mendoza filed a civil lawsuit against Peters in Florida alleging battery and intentional infliction of emotional distress. She amended this lawsuit in October to remove her explicit sexual-assault allegations, as her attorney stated those claims belong in the separate Massachusetts criminal prosecution.

Separately, Peters was arrested in Florida for misdemeanor battery and criminal conspiracy to commit battery following a March arrest for allegedly filming and encouraging a fight between two women the month prior, and later shared the footage online. Prosecutors declined to pursue those charges in July, citing insufficient evidence. Peters' content centers on "looksmaxxing," an online subculture focused on maximizing physical attractiveness through grooming, fitness, cosmetic procedures, and, in some cases, more extreme practices. Across livestreams and short-form videos, Peters discusses appearance, evaluates physical features, and interacts with others, including women, whose attractiveness he sometimes assesses in front of his audience. Clips from these exchanges circulate widely on social media, reaching viewers who may never watch his full streams. One February clip, in which Peters meets a muscular Arizona State University student, has passed 16 million views on X, and a meme-tracking site logged 13.5 million views in its first three days.

> ***"What young men are being told through social media is that their appearance is what is most important about them."***
>
> ***- Prof. Austin***

Peters belongs to what researchers call the "manosphere," an umbrella term for online communities and influencers that often promote misogyny and anti-feminism. Its best-known figure is Andrew Tate, a British-American former kickboxer whose short TikTok videos made him a global name in 2022, before Meta, TikTok, and YouTube banned him.

Looksmaxxing itself grew out of "incel" forums, spaces where men blamed their romantic and sexual failures on women's supposed preference for certain physical traits. Peters has walked out of an interview when asked about his relationship with Tate, and the two men's legal troubles now rhyme. Tate was indicted in Romania on rape and human trafficking charges in 2023 and, according to Sky News, was indicted this September again on charges that include trafficking minors. Like Peters, he denies wrongdoing.



Dr. Sergio Imparato, a Harvard government professor who teaches moral philosophy, first read about Clavicular in the "New York Times" and brought looksmaxxing into his Gov10: "Foundations of Political Theory" lectures on virtue ethics. He identified two trends fused together in this cultural phenomenon to the "Harvard Independent": "a trend that strongly emphasizes looks, appearances, as giving worth to human beings, [and] ... a trend towards maximization, towards optimization."

Together, Imparato explained, they treat one's face as a measure of their personhood, telling them to improve it continuously. "Clavicular basically argued that he would rather lose his virility than his hair, and by virility, he used an expletive speaking about his sexual organs, basically, which to me was… quite interesting," Imparato said. "[A] philosophical understanding of… oneself that is grounded primarily on appearances may lead to a devaluation of the dignity of the person, first in oneself … and unavoidably in others."

A July 2025 Common Sense Media survey of more than 1,000 boys ages 11 to 17 found that 91% regularly see messages about body image or appearance and 73% regularly see "digital masculinity" content about fighting, building muscle and making money. 68% said that content showed up in their feeds without them searching for it. The more boys saw, the more their appearance concerns grew: 14% of high-exposure boys reported low self-esteem, compared with 5% of low-exposure boys, and 41% said social media makes them feel they should change how they look, compared with 9%. Separately, a study of more than 3,000 young men ages 16 to 25 in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia found nearly two-thirds regularly engage with masculinity influencers.

Roberto Olivardia, a clinical psychologist and Harvard Medical School lecturer who studies body image, sees that erosion happen in his office. He asks his young patients which influencers they follow on social media and the kind of content they interact with. Many are lonely and want acceptance, he said, and looksmaxxing promises belonging if you look a certain way. "You want to optimize, optimize, optimize," Olivardia said to the "Harvard Independent," describing a loop with no end.

Additionally, Olivardia sees patients with social anxieties, depression, and traumatic histories. "[They feel a] sense of real inadequacy or insecurities about something, who then overcompensate[s] by [believing that] 'if I look perfect then I am perfect.'"

What worries him is that many people within the looksmaxxing community selling this blueprint have no medical credentials or experience, influencing boys and young men on a psychological level.

> ***"Looksmaxxing itself grew out of 'incel' forums, spaces where men blamed their romantic and sexual failures on women's supposed preference for certain physical traits."***

On campus, this cultural phenomenon's appeal is even easier to spot. "Looksmaxxing addresses a very valid critique of society in the sense that society is very looks-based," Audrey Han '30 noted. She argues that Peters' own makeover shows something attainable for boys and young men: if they follow his lifestyle, their appearance will improve and, subsequently, their lives will.

By Peters' own account, that makeover includes bonesmashing, hitting the face with a hammer or fist to microfracture bone in the hope it heals thicker, and peptides, short chains of amino acids the body uses to send signals between cells. Some peptides are FDA-approved medicines, though the ones sold online for looksmaxxing are often unapproved "research-grade" products. Peters has described hitting his own jawline with a hammer and discussed taking unprescribed peptides. A recent peer-reviewed analysis found searches for "bonesmashing" rose about 5,000% in a year.

"I think a lot of people are unsatisfied with their life," Han said. She sees looksmaxxing as one way people cope with that dissatisfaction. Additionally, Han traces the culture to the forums where it began. "Looksmaxxing comes from the sort of incel forums and this place where women are very regularly dehumanized or sort of subjected to objectification," she noted. She feels that not liking one's bone structure holds a valid argument, though the entitlement of sleeping with a woman due to one's appearance is a completely different thing. Belief in hypergamy—the idea that women chase the best-looking men—feeds that entitlement, and Peters' hyperfixation on his own appearance instills a sense of superiority, that he is better than everyone else, according to Han.

Austin said her clinician colleagues at Boston Children's Hospital have been alarmed by recent cases of boys and young men arriving at the emergency department with injuries tied to these kinds of practices promoted on social media.

Austin sees an old pressure finding a new audience. "This is the kind of messaging girls and young women have been getting for decades. It's now targeting boys in a way that it has never before … and it's through looksmaxxing," she said. She notices that the most valued physical traits within the looksmaxxing community are often associated with white European heritage, reinforcing racist ideals about male attractiveness. For boys facing loneliness, body insecurity, and struggles in school or the economy, she said, looksmaxxing offers a solution that feels within their control but fails to address the real problems. "This is a distraction of the most supreme kind," she insisted.

Denise Pan '29 sees this cultural movement happening on her own feed. On her TikTok "For You" page, she has come across peptide sellers who cite lab results she does not trust. "None of it is regulated in any way. You could literally just be buying vials of water," she said. Creators promoting the products list discount codes on their profile bios, and she sees the entire market as a way to exploit insecurity. "I just think it's just a big scam and scheme to get people who are insecure about their looks to spend even more money," she said. Stanford Medicine research confirms these risks: peptides sold through the unregulated online market can carry contaminants, and many lack safety data.

"Allegations of sexual violence [are] part and parcel with what [looksmaxxing] is pushing out into the world."

- Prof. Austin

Austin believes the largest profits go to the platforms. "Clavicular would not be Clavicular; he would still be just Braden Peters if it were not for the social media algorithms pushing his content out," she said. She cited a "Guardian" investigation in which test accounts posing as teenage boys were served misogynist content within hours or days. She also noted that algorithms place extreme material beside ordinary fitness advice, so a video on injecting unapproved peptides sits next to one on eating three healthy meals, making extreme practices look more routine.

"This is the kind of messaging girls and young women have been getting for decades. It's now targeting boys in a way that it has never before … and it's through looksmaxxing."

- Prof. Austin

That credibility complicates the allegations, Olivardia said, because followers who feel a relationship with an influencer can struggle to reason with accusations. "There's this sort of almost fake relationship with social media… even the idea you're following someone, you know," he remarked. After Tate was charged, he recalled, some patients condemned the allegations but kept following him for his physique and discipline. Olivardia then compared the pattern to the Bill Cosby sexual misconduct scandals. "It was really hard for people like myself who grew up in a generation where he was like America's favorite TV dad to imagine this happening, but both things can be true."

Pan has seen both grave and lighthearted posts about the charges against Peters.

Platforms have taken limited action so far regarding broadcasting regulations. Kick, the streaming site where Peters live streams, removed him in December after a livestream appeared to show him hitting a man with his car. Lawmakers are focusing on who can interact with these platforms. Australia's ban on accounts for children under 16 took effect in December, and platforms have since removed about 4.7 million accounts. The United Kingdom government has announced plans to raise its minimum age to 16, while the Massachusetts House voted 129 to 25 in April to bar children under 14 from social media and require parental consent for 14- and 15-year-olds. Supporters have acknowledged that similar laws in other states have faced First Amendment challenges.

What platforms should do about it divides the sources. Austin favors stricter rules. "It's something that we need stronger regulation to keep [tech companies] from being able to exploit young people the way they do," she said.

Imparato supports similar age limits. "I would support, for example, the idea of setting an age limit for … the use of certain social media. 16, maybe 18." He is more hesitant about removing creators over allegations alone. "I would be a little bit cautious in imposing limits on the basis of allegations alone." If a creator has been sentenced, he said, limits on their platform make sense.

Pan disagreed that platforms should be the ones to decide. "I think the platform doesn't have that responsibility; I think it's more up to the consumers." She would, however, "support countries taking creators off if the country has laws around censorship."

"Allegations of sexual violence [are] part and parcel with what [looksmaxxing] is pushing out into the world," Austin said.

However, Imparato would not go that far. "I don't want to speculate over the extent to which … looksmaxxing led to criminal acts because [I] really don't know if that is the case," he said. Nothing in the allegations establishes that looksmaxxing led to any criminal conduct, and Peters has denied them.

Madi Kang '29 (madisonkang@college.harvard.edu) is comping the "Harvard Independent."

Graphics by Tess Harris '29 & Linden McCarl '28



Harvard is a Hashtag

Harvard student creators weigh the value of the Harvard name as AI complicates what an online persona looks like.

By MALA BRUMM '30

Jenny Ng '28 was scrolling on her phone one evening when a "Day in My Life at Harvard" video appeared on her TikTok "For You" page. At first, she didn't think much of it; the genre has become a staple of college social media, and she likes supporting other creators. Then, she kept swiping. The next slide showed the creator sitting in class, carrying a tote bag that looked like Ng's. She also had the same pink Stanley cup, down to the same straw lid. "I was like, 'This is sus,'" Ng said to the "Harvard Independent."

The frames looked familiar because they were. They were taken from a viral video Ng made as a first-year, then run through artificial intelligence to put a stranger's face over her own. Ng said the rest of the account was fabricated too. "None of her life made sense or lined up," she explained.

Ng screenshotted the account to remember to return to it once more salient tasks were completed. Later that week, bored before dinner, she recorded a reaction video in under two minutes. Within about 40 minutes of posting, it had more than 100,000 views.

She had a hunch it would be big. "I know that AI and Harvard are two very big hashtags and buzzwords that push content out," she admitted.

Both her video and the stolen content serve as—albeit unusual—examples of a broader trend: using the Harvard name to drive online attention—a trend that has endured for more than a decade.

In 2022, Harvard Magazine profiled the school's student influencers, including Hanna Evensen '16, who began posting YouTube videos as a first-year in 2012 and found that viewers responded much more to her Harvard videos than to her other content. That same year, a TikTok by Abigail Mack '25 about her Common Application essay was viewed about 20 million times.

That appeal has carried over to today's student creators, including Harry Eisenhardt '29, who started posting last fall. He makes health and wellness content, some of which is educational.

Eisenhardt didn't include his Harvard attendance in his content until the summer, and even then, he said, the name wasn't central. "It's just a name that I use at the beginning of it, more to get attention within the first three seconds."

Initially, his experience complicated his assumptions. His first viral video mentioned Harvard, which led him to believe there was a clear formula for content success. "I originally thought, 'Wow, it actually makes a difference,'" he said. "And then I kept posting with it, and it didn't really make much of a difference in the attraction that content got."

These opening seconds carry heavy weight on short-form content platforms where viewers can move on with just a single swipe. Research from Influencer Marketing Hub found that 71% of TikTok users decide within the first three seconds whether to keep watching. "If somebody's attention is grabbed and then they see the name, it might be beneficial for retaining attention," Eisenhardt explained. "But if somebody's attention isn't grabbed in the first seconds, I don't think it's going to do much to change that."

Ng, by contrast, credits the name with opening doors. She began making content before arriving at Harvard, but she started investing more time in it during the spring of her first year. She signed with an agency that summer when she had to treat it as a real responsibility, she said. "I still use the Harvard name. I mean, it is synonymous with my life," she said.

Her content falls mostly in the lifestyle space: one of her most viral videos was a "day in my life" vlog from her first year, and she also posts study tips and her opinions on life at Harvard. Content about Harvard as an institution, she noted, is easy to find elsewhere. "If someone wanted to watch a tour of Harvard's campus, they certainly could," she said.

Ng does not downplay what the Harvard name has done for her: "I'm not going to pretend Harvard wasn't a reason that I got to the level of success I have now on the internet. I'm not going to pretend I did this all by myself, my personality."

Still, she argues the name only goes so far, especially given that so many Harvard students post online. "If it's just Harvard, then there are so many creators that people could support," she said. "I think what people stay for [in] my content is probably the vibes and the type of character personality I portray," Ng continued.

Ng's view reflects the algorithm-driven side of the work. Years of posting have given her a sense of when a video will perform, and that deviating from a usual format can backfire. The first hour indicates what will come: if a video passes a thousand views quickly, it is likely to take off, she said. Her AI video, which doesn't follow her typical format, followed that pattern.

Both Ng and Eisenhardt acknowledged that the name "Harvard" carries assumptions, and both had reservations about them.

Eisenhardt said that the Harvard name makes people more likely to trust what he says because of what they believe the school represents. Still, he does not think it should. "I could be an Econ major and start giving advice about physics, which has no real correlation," he said. "If I've never taken a physics class before, and I've never done any research about it, going to Harvard doesn't really show much about my knowledge."

Eisenhardt also understands the other side, that some viewers read the name as an inherent flex. "A lot of people may think that you're arrogant or using it to show that you're smarter than somebody else, which is not the case," he said.

Harvard is not the only school whose name travels online. A 2021 Yale Daily News report found that videos tagged #yale drew a combined 124.2 million views, top videos by Yale students averaged about half a million, and creators felt the school's name boosted their content. Still, Harvard's brand may carry more weight than its peers'. In the same 2022 article, one Harvard creator told Harvard Magazine that some audiences recognize Harvard's name but not Columbia's or Yale's, and arrive with strong assumptions about what Harvard students are like.

Ng described the same tension as "a double-edged sword." The school gives her credibility on topics like study tips and life advice. "I did a random get ready with me where I talked about my take on being single, after a breakup, and it actually resonated with a lot more people than what I was expecting," she recalled. "People almost assume that I'm a bit wiser than someone else."

But those expectations come with a catch. "People expect that I can never say anything grammatically incorrect. I can never be wrong," Ng said. If she missteps or shares a nuanced opinion, the comments quickly turn critical.

"The people that support me, I think, really value what I have to say," she said. "But then the people that attach me more so to the Harvard name and don't really know me as well want to find any reason to tear me apart." She said she tries not to dwell on it.

On campus, neither creator reported much pushback from their peers. Eisenhardt said he hasn't heard direct criticism, though friends have told him some people see creators differently. "It's not really that big of an issue," he explained. "I don't really think it matters."

Ng said most people are relaxed about it because content creation has become so normal. "It's really hard to know anyone that doesn't know someone personally that's trying to create content online," she said.

The data agrees with Ng's observation. Goldman Sachs Research estimated in 2023 that there are about 50 million creators worldwide and expected that number to grow by 10-20% a year. Interest runs especially high among young people. A 2023 Morning Consult survey found that 57% of Gen Z respondents want to become influencers, compared with 41% of adults overall, and over half of Gen Z respondents consider it a respectable career choice.

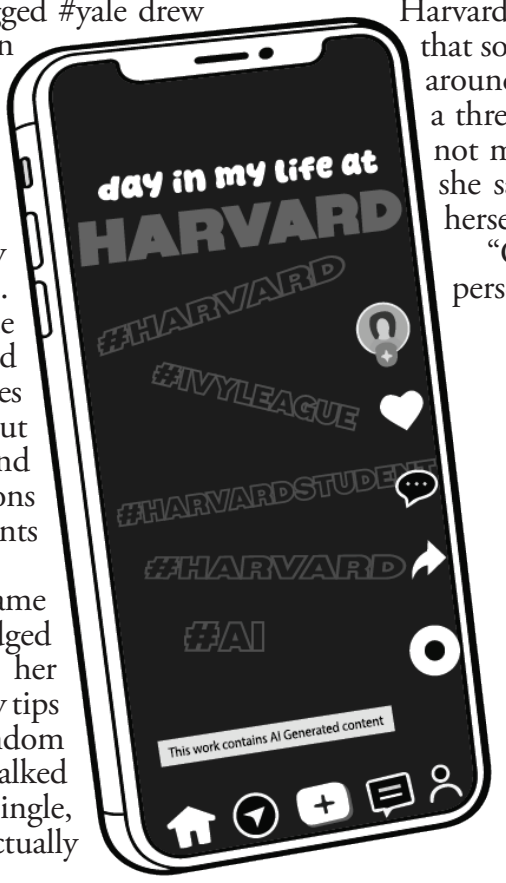
Ng also noted that she arrived at Harvard already making videos, which she thinks made classmates more accepting. "I don't think I project anything that's something that people can really have a bone to pick with," she added.

Her videos also reach people outside her peer group. After her AI video spread to Instagram and YouTube, Ng said a teaching fellow mentioned it in a discussion section, and her Chinese professor said he had seen her videos on his own feed.

Despite having her content stolen online, Ng said she was not especially upset. In her view, posting publicly means accepting people can do what they want with your content. "The internet is just an abyss," she said.

The AI-generated account that copied Ng's videos also reminds us how much weight the Harvard label carries online—enough that someone built a fabricated student around it. For Eisenhardt, the name is a three-second hook that may or may not matter. For Ng, it opened a door she says she now must keep proving herself to earn her way through.

"Can AI recreate this beautiful personality?" Ng said. "I think not."



Mala Brumm '30 (mbrumm@college.harvard.edu) is comping the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Isra Khan '30

FORUM

Inadequacy in Gender Equity is Institutional

How Harvard can take consent seriously in light of the "Cornell 7."

By ANONYMOUS

In kindergarten, one of my closest male friends shoved a banana into my crotch at lunch. Uncomfortable with the sensation, I told my teacher and asked to be moved away from him in the seating assignment. The next thing I knew, I was dragged into the principal's office and asked to report it. I was 5—what could I have possibly known about sexuality and, in that regard, what invaded it? The next day, that boy sat next to me again, none the wiser about what he had done. During the most foundational developmental years, the one core principle of consent was completely ignored.

From this starting point, inadequate gender equity takes root in educational institutions. The lessons that prevail when schools inadequately address sexual misconduct and inequity follow students from kindergarten to graduation, when they apply what they believe is the correct reasoning to these difficult sexual experiences.

At what age is it too young to teach children that they can say "No" to unwanted physical touch? While education surrounding consent has increased in recent years, particularly through sexual education programs, students my age, now almost adults, still struggle to determine what the word means truly.

I continued to experience this lack of understanding into my junior year of high school, when my boyfriend frequently told me, "Come on, everyone is doing it," when I argued for sexual abstinence. Growing up religious, I considered purity as important as breathing. But I loved him. After numerous rejections, I finally conceded under coercion. It was twisted, having intimacy with someone I loved but not feeling fully present. Some moments were fully consensual, while others were forced upon me: my body constrained by the conflicting feelings of love, unable to maintain a harsh "No."

"At what age is it too young to teach children that they can say 'No' to unwanted physical touch?"

That loss of purity broke my soul and morals, and I began to see my own perceptions of reality shift. For some, this was not rape; it was simply me doing my part as a girlfriend. For me, however, it was nonconsensual intimacy disguised as love. I can never get that purity back.

Since that moment, I have not felt myself completely: I was changing my beliefs to fit the desire of someone I thought to be a lover. I thought back to kindergarten and the continuous lack of education around bodily autonomy, and I wondered what kind of man that boy grew up to be. Would he, like my ex-boyfriend had, coerce a woman into "consensual" sex after months of pleading? Would he recount that it was her duty as a girlfriend to provide him with pleasure?

In this way, the very institutions that were supposed to protect us as children failed to teach us respect for even our own bodies in nuanced situations. Sadly, we were failed by our education systems as children—and continue to be failed by the meager amounts of sexual education we have as adults-to-be.

During the first month of my first year of college, someone asked me out. Once again, I faced the same pressuring question: "Are you sure? It'll be fun!" After having to respond multiple times, I learned that being educated does not guarantee someone will accept a single "No." Harvard's plan for preventing sexual coercion and assault on campus is a few modules and one entryway meeting dedicated to Title IX. A step above previous years of education, to be sure—yet still far from sufficient.

"Harvard should not wait for education to become the punishment."

With the mishandled "Cornell 7" case coming to light, it becomes impossible to ignore how "elite" institutions continue to fail to protect and educate students. The allegations demonstrate the consequences of treating consent as something students should already understand by the time they reach college and raise underlying questions about the inadequacy of consent education across all grade levels. Most striking, some of Cornell's eventual disciplinary sanctions included reflection papers. Education became part of the response, not part of the prevention.

Harvard should not wait for education to become the punishment.

After completing the modules and meeting with the entryway, I noticed that the preparation and ways to assess the situations I had been in were lacking. What about a boyfriend who promised intimacy as a natural step in a relationship, a "must-have," or a childhood friend who swore he was kidding around? What about a situation where you are asked over and over again for intimacy, to the point where you are simply worn down?

These situations follow a pattern rooted in a lack of quality consent education and understanding of bodily autonomy. Not all situations are equal, but they expose the same deficiency in how society teaches consent. Students must be allowed to learn about and understand intoxication, coercion, persistent pressure, power dynamics, affirmative consent, and bystander responsibility.

These are not fringe hypotheticals. They happen to countless students nationwide. They are gray areas where students, already grossly uneducated on consent, are expected to make decisions without ever being given the ability to recognize what is happening to them or the language to describe it.

We are taught that "no means no," but far less about what happens after the first rejection: the bargaining, guilt-tripping, promising, and waiting for resistance to end. Consent education is not just about teaching students to listen for direct refusal; it must teach them not to manufacture a "yes."

I entered kindergarten without the language of bodily autonomy. I entered my first relationship without the language to understand how persistence could become coercion. I entered Harvard to find that one of the world's most prestigious educational institutions still largely condensed one of the most important lessons of our lives into online modules and meetings that many students I knew treated as a joke.

For Harvard students and administration, the Cornell case should not be a scandal to watch from the safety of Cambridge. Rather, it should be a warning. Elite education does not inherently produce a true understanding of consent. All eyes are on you, Harvard.

This piece was written anonymously for the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Taylor Bierwerth '29



Voltaire's Volitions

I'm tired of all this reading.

By NOAH BASDEN '29

I know very little about François-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire, beyond reading "Candide," a book I remember disliking thoroughly at age 15. However, throughout college, Voltaire has crept back into my consciousness (albeit in a much more palatable form). Despite having a complicated relationship with religion, Voltaire spoke of it often, writing on a myriad of topics and occasionally inventing Christian myths that have stood the test of time. Notably, in a verse epistle dated 1768, addressed to the anonymous author of "The Three Impostors," he touched on something fascinating. In one of his most famous sayings, he wrote: "If God hadn't existed, it would have been necessary to invent him."

Scholars debate whether he meant it sincerely or cynically, given his well-documented opposition to organized religion. Nevertheless, he raised an interesting question about what we now recognize as a foundational pillar of human existence and societal function. His words are most thought-provoking for what they leave unsaid. My own continuation of Voltaire's line of questioning goes as follows: If God hadn't existed, we would have had to invent him—but

"I distinguish between faith in God and faith as a concept because I have never doubted the latter."

if we'd been given the choice, what kind of God would we have invented?

I was raised in a household surrounded by prayer—we didn't eat a meal or sleep in a bed without offering some semblance of thanks to God. I wouldn't be surprised if decades of prayer had worn two knee-shaped indentations into the carpet beside my bed.

Yet, as I have aged, I still feel as if my faith in the eternal father walks on a tightrope. Steady, but never completely certain. I distinguish between faith in God and faith as a concept because I have never doubted the latter.

Voltaire's use of the word "invent" is interesting to me in this context, as invention carries two distinct meanings. On one hand, the verb implies original creation; on the other, it implies dishonesty or deception. History shows that religion is not a fixed trait of human existence but a societal adaptation that emerged as life grew more complex—something we invented to explain the unexplainable. However, as religion has evolved, in many senses, it has become a tool to justify senseless acts of violence against others in the name of a higher being.

As I have grown older and walked further and further on the tightrope that is religious life, I have seen the astounding evil this world has produced in the name of religion. I continually ask myself why. Why would a deity, of any faith, allow their believers to carry out atrocities in their name? Would we call that a lord worthy of worship—and why? Why do we not recognize, more publicly, that the God we have invented has been used as justification for the unjustifiable?

The answer is, to me, simple: it is not the fault of religion that these things have occurred, but bad actors sheltering behind religion as an excuse to allow themselves to commit evil acts whilst claiming divine consent. If today we were given the agency to mold our God, would we rationally create a being that demands unquestioning loyalty and an organized religion

"The tools we use to build faiths eventually all become tools of persecution in the hands of bad actors. This we cannot escape."

so susceptible to corruption? I think not. Would we create a system where suffering is seen as a means to virtue? I'm not so sure. Though I believe these things, humanity is also inclined to divide. We have built boundaries where they needn't have existed, and even if we invented a perfect, rational God, I believe we would still find ways to divide ourselves.

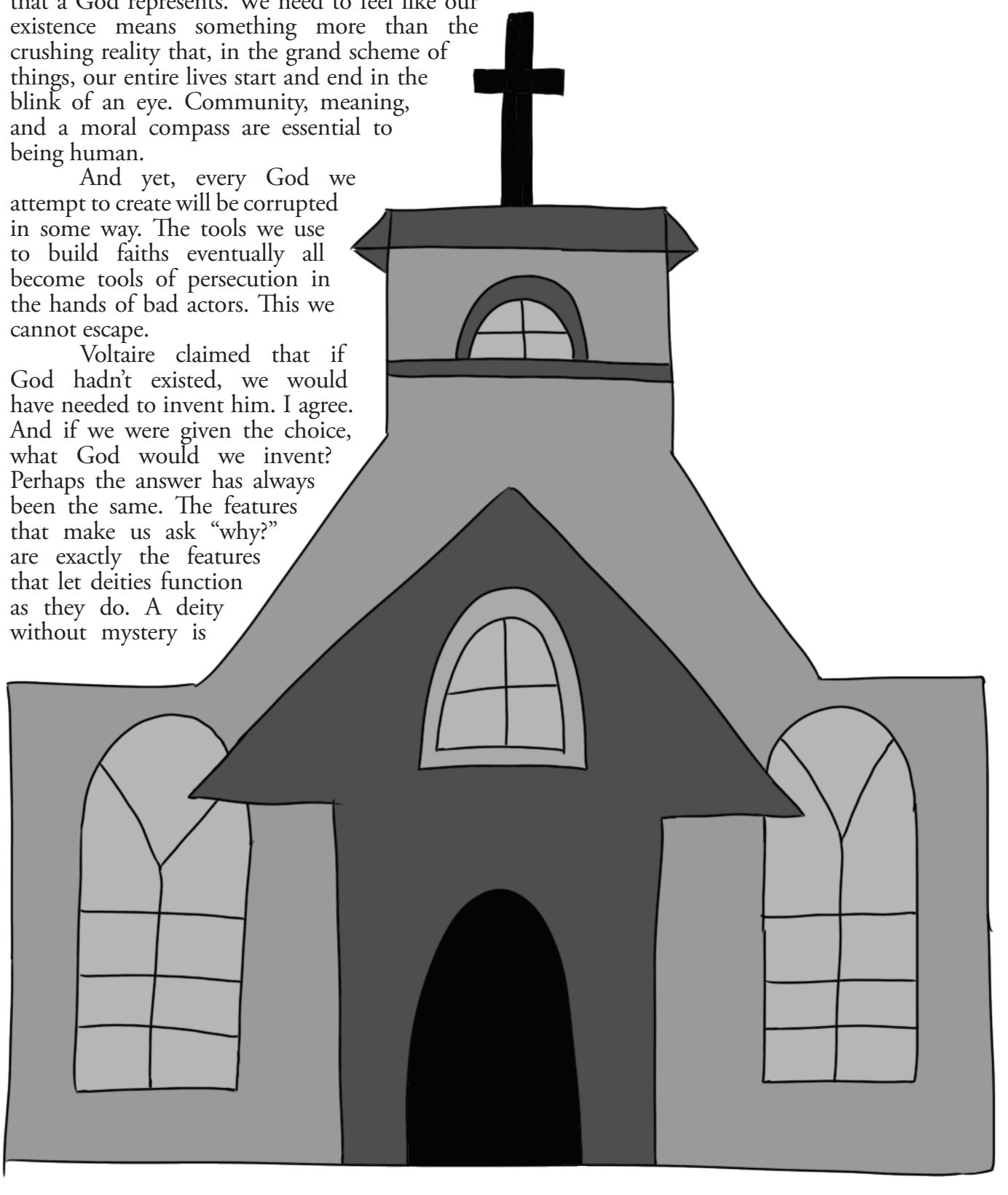
The situation is, by any stretch of the imagination, nonsensical, but so too is faith. Either way, we need a higher being, or something that a God represents. We need to feel like our existence means something more than the crushing reality that, in the grand scheme of things, our entire lives start and end in the blink of an eye. Community, meaning, and a moral compass are essential to being human.

And yet, every God we attempt to create will be corrupted in some way. The tools we use to build faiths eventually all become tools of persecution in the hands of bad actors. This we cannot escape.

Voltaire claimed that if God hadn't existed, we would have needed to invent him. I agree. And if we were given the choice, what God would we invent? Perhaps the answer has always been the same. The features that make us ask "why?" are exactly the features that let deities function as they do. A deity without mystery is more akin to philosophy than faith, and a faith grounded completely in proof is no faith at all. So, to answer my extension of Voltaire's question, if given the choice, what would we choose to build? Nothing new. We would choose what we know again and again, across the faiths. Not out of delusion, but because we know we know no better and cannot build a better future on a reality we fundamentally don't understand. The mystery of faith is great, and the mystery of God is greater.

Noah Basden '29 (nhbasden@college.harvard.edu) needs to go to church more.

Graphic by Adriana St. Clair '29



Why Anne Carson Won the 2026 Nobel Prize in Literature

Examining some of Carson's most famous works and how they've changed contemporary literature.

By EDEN BRIDGE-HAYES '29

On Oct. 8, the 2026 Nobel Prize in Literature was announced, and classicists around the world celebrated: Anne Carson—acclaimed poet and translator of many Ancient Greek works—had won at last. Although I root for Haruki Murakami every year like a middle-aged father cheering on his favorite football team (next year I swear Murakami is going to win it all!), I do think Carson was a fantastic choice.

The Nobel committee stated that Anne Carson received the award for "her bold and inventive oeuvre that, in playful dialogue with the classical tradition, has created new forms for contemporary literature." But what exactly does that mean?

One of Carson's most famous literary works is "The Glass Essay," a long-form lyric poem that blends a personal narrative of heartbreak with critical commentary on Emily Brontë. Carson intertwines a constructed narrative of a devastating breakup with Emily Brontë's oeuvre and life. In doing so, Carson incorporates critical analyses of Brontë's life and observations from her sister, Charlotte, to comment on heartbreak, isolation, and literature as an emotional outlet.

"The Glass Essay" begins with the speaker lying awake at 4 a.m., thinking of her past relationship with a man named "Law." She contrasts the sexual nudity sought by Law with the "naked glimpses of [her] soul," 13 images which she calls "Nudes." This emphasis on what it means to be naked appears even in the poem's title, "The Glass Essay," as readers view the speaker as if through a piece of glass: completely bare and unfiltered.

Brontë is intertwined with the speaker's grief in a way that at first seems out of place—how does this author from the 19th century relate to the speaker's breakup? Eventually, readers understand that the speaker identifies with Brontë, feeling that her liminality and isolation after being abandoned are turning her into Emily Brontë. At the end of the poem's second section, "SHE," the speaker asks: "What meat is it, Emily, that we need?"

The speaker does not just allude to Brontë as a kindred spirit, however. The poem's unique perspective—what the Nobel committee calls "bold" and "inventive"—comes from Carson's combination of this intensely personal narrative with literary analysis. The speaker quotes unnamed critics (likely inventions by Carson to represent a general argument within the literary world rather than any one scholar), using interpretations of Brontë and her life to deepen her self-understanding or refute a claim with her own experience. In one stanza, a disparaging critic wonders why Brontë longed for liberty when her home life was satisfactory. The speaker responds that imprisonment takes many forms and describes her own childhood, showing how she reads Brontë's poetry through her own life.

Despite the beauty and innovation within "The Glass Essay," my personal favorite work by Carson is her translation of Sappho's lyric poetry, which she titled "If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho." Only one of Sappho's poems was long known in full, but Carson translates every known fragment, using white space and brackets to show the gaps in the manuscripts, or lacunae, in each poem. This emphasizes the lost parts of Sappho's poetry, allowing readers to fill in the gaps themselves.

The reception of "If Not, Winter" was resoundingly positive—a feat in itself, especially for a translation of Classical texts. "This method imitates the tattered reality of the Greek texts of Sappho, yet gives free rein to the translator's and reader's imagination at the same time," said classicist Emily Greenwood, a professor of Classics and comparative literature at Harvard University.



I feel that this description encapsulates Carson's masterful translation: what is left unsaid gives readers agency. This also invites "new forms for contemporary literature," as the Nobel committee states. Although Carson's work with the classical tradition forced her to translate around these gaps, future poets may choose to leave them intentionally, compelling readers to fill them in with their own experiences and fostering different interpretations of the text.

The work's title comes from "Fragment 22," a short, sparse lyric poem that describes yearning for someone unobtainable. The fragment ends with the lines, "In fact she herself once blamed me / Kyprogeneia / because I prayed / this word: / I want." Even Aphrodite (often called Kyprogeneia, or Cyprus-born) frowns on the speaker's longing. Love itself reproves something as supposedly pure as love. This illustrates the friction against social norms that Sappho frequently grapples with, whether that be because of her speculated homosexuality or openness with erotic desire. Although the poem is incomplete, the raw emotion it conveys transcends time and, thanks to Anne Carson's translation, language.

Some of the most powerful fragments are only a few lines. Although these phrases were undoubtedly part of larger poems, the short, incomplete statements suggest that Sappho tried to capture a torrent of emotions through fleeting, unfinished vignettes. A few of my favorite examples are as follows: "you burn me" (Fragment 38), "you came and I was crazy for you / and you cooled my mind that burned with longing" (Fragment 48), "I don't know what to do / two states of mind in me" (Fragment 51), "do I still yearn for my virginity?" (Fragment 107), and "someone will remember us / I say / even in another time" (Fragment 147). Carson's bold choice to give these brief fragments their own pages highlights what Sappho's poetry has lost.

Anne Carson has many other works that demonstrate the mastery that won her the Nobel Prize, but these two, I believe, represent her range.

Her ability to innovate within a field that has existed for thousands of years while still paying homage to its origins amazes me, and I am delighted she won the Nobel Prize. Of course, the beauty of Carson's poetry is that everyone may experience it differently, so I encourage you to explore her "bold and inventive oeuvre" for yourself.

"The poem's unique perspective—what the Nobel committee calls 'bold' and 'inventive'—comes from Carson's combination of this intensely personal narrative with literary analysis."

"Her ability to innovate within a field that has existed for thousands of years while still paying homage to its origins amazes me, and I am delighted she won the Nobel Prize."

Eden Bridge-Hayes '29 (edenbridgehayes@college.harvard.edu) just added Anne Carson's verse novel, "Autobiography of Red," to her reading list.

Graphic by Ella Cohen '29

The Privilege of Passing By

Student detachment from international disasters, and what we can do about it.

By ANIKA GUPTA '30

AI-generated fruit videos. Scroll. "What I eat in a day." Scroll. Brutal, unflinching disaster in Nepal as hundreds die from floods. Scroll. "Get ready with me to try out a new nail salon!" Scroll.

Reading this routine may feel unnerving, but nearly all of us have experienced this sequence of content. Social media has taught us to treat disaster with casual callousness. It has made us comfortable scrolling past horrific images of violence and death. When destruction and tragedy are as accessible as they are escapable—simply by closing a tab—it can be hard to feel any obligation to make a difference.

On Aug. 26, flash floods on the Nepal-Tibet border left at least 469 people dead and more than 1,000 missing, as walls of water slammed through villages and valleys. A landslide triggered by a glacial collapse in the Himalayan region caused the destruction. Scientists reported that the rock foundation was unstable, partly because of a 2015 earthquake. However, climate change played a major role in accelerating glacier movement and triggering the floods.

> ***"Social media has taught us to treat disaster with casual callousness. It has made us comfortable scrolling past horrific images of violence and death."***

One reason the Nepal floods were so publicized was the presence of foreign victims, including up to 90 American tourists who went missing. Nepal drew international attention, but even then, the response to the tragedy felt detached.

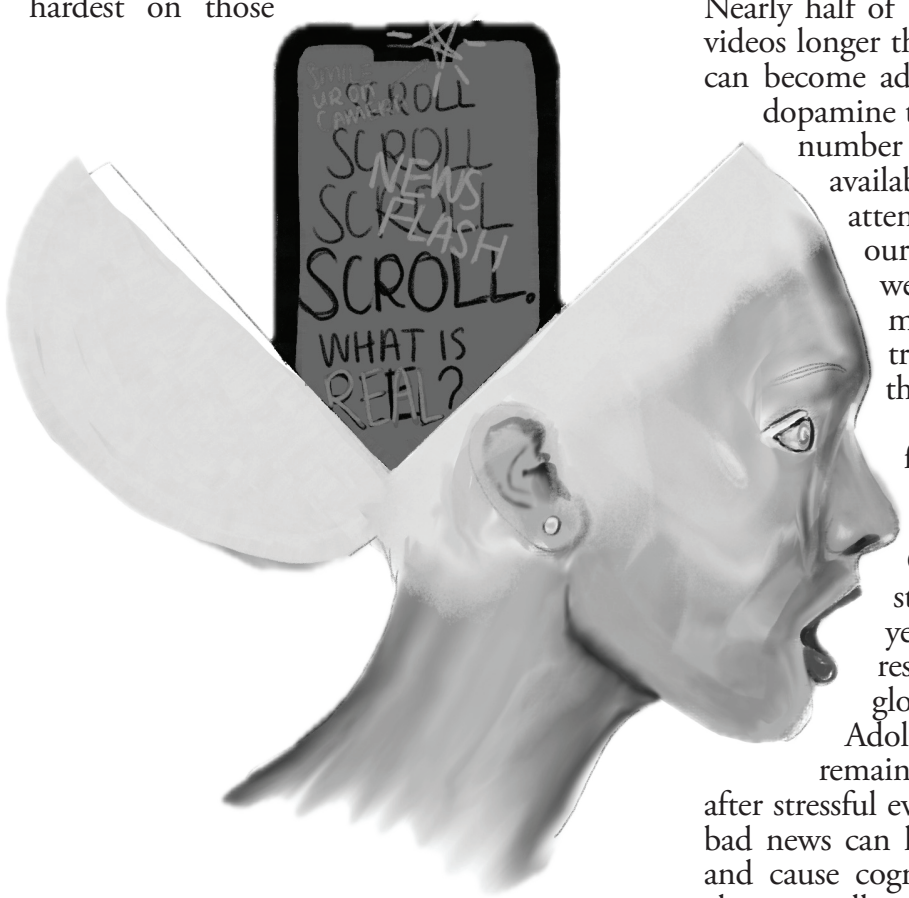
Nepal contributes less than 0.1% of global greenhouse gas emissions, yet faces some of the most severe consequences of human-driven climate change. Disasters like the floods are not purely "natural"; climate change made them more likely and more severe, and the physical toll falls hardest on those who contributed least. This disconnect between responsibility and suffering on an international scale reflects how separated governments and citizens have become. Despite causing a large share of the problem, wealthier citizens and governments do not feel obligated to help solve it.

Nepal's government estimated that recovery from the tragedy will cost $4.7 billion, around 10% of Nepal's annual gross domestic product. The United States has pledged only $3.6 million, despite emitting around 12.7% of global emissions annually. Nepal has argued that the floods result from the climate crisis, requesting international support and funding as climate justice given the country's low emissions. "We are paying the ultimate price for a global crisis we did not create," Nepal's Foreign Minister Shisir Khanal said. However, wealthy countries have not responded.

Beyond world leaders' lack of response, individuals have also struggled to respond. As I scrolled through TikTok videos depicting the disaster, I was horrified. But when I opened the comments, I noticed people reacting with GIFs or commenting, "Is this AI?" The advent of artificial intelligence has made us even more removed from what's going on in our algorithms: we are not sure what we are seeing is real, and even if it is, we don't seem to care. It is too easy to ignore death when it is on a 6-by-3-inch display. Furthermore, being exposed to every crisis at once can make us feel like we cannot give equal attention to each issue, leaving us unable to do anything at all.

This phenomenon is called "disaster fatigue," a feeling of emotional and physical exhaustion caused by continuous, unrelenting exposure to crises. Twenty-four-hour news and targeted algorithms have rendered our brains overstimulated by information and unable to process it. Feeling like we are constantly living in an emergency can cause us to disengage and prevent us from taking action or making decisions. Mental health professionals have also used the term "compassion fatigue" to specifically refer to our shrinking capacities for empathy in the face of atrocities.

Social media has supercharged these experiences of fatigue. Short-form videos popularized by TikTok and Instagram Reels have conditioned users to instant dopamine hits. Nearly half of TikTok users surveyed described videos longer than a minute as "stressful." Users can become addicted to the immediacy of the dopamine they receive, along with the sheer number of options for entertainment available at their fingertips. Losing our attention spans may be costing us our critical thinking skills. When we cannot focus for more than a minute, we can't think deeply or truly feel for people halfway across the globe.



This feeling of separation from disaster is magnified in youth. Teen and young adult brains are particularly sensitive. Our prefrontal cortexes are still developing and do not yet downregulate emotional responses as efficiently, making global threats feel more personal. Adolescents' stress response systems remain activated longer than adults' after stressful events, and prolonged exposure to bad news can keep stress hormones circulating and cause cognitive exhaustion. Young people also naturally seek stimulation and connection, making them more susceptible to behaviors like "doomscrolling," which bombards the brain with stress and leads to digital burnout.

Nepal's floods are not an isolated incident; they are a domino in a long, long chain of climate and social disasters. War and genocide run rampant and unchecked, and responses from international leaders and governing bodies have not been enough. These intersecting problems are often called "polycrises," situations where distinct crises overlap and intensify one another, making solutions feel out of reach. It can be difficult for young people to engage in a world of polycrises; voting, protesting, or working hard may not yield tangible improvements, eroding personal agency. That lack of agency can often lead youth to feel deterministically that the future is ruined, further discouraging them from thinking about what they can do to change it. Many of us have stopped trying, instead slipping into learned helplessness because fixing anything feels impossible.

At Harvard, a place full of politically engaged students and future world leaders and changemakers, one might expect a substantial difference; instead, one finds disappointment. I notice that my peers are equally disconnected from violence that happens across the globe. We can talk in theory about how neorealism explains foreign intervention in Sudan, but we cannot really empathize with the civilians suffering. Many of us have seen footage of the Nepal floods online, but most comments have been limited to "That's crazy," with little follow-up. This is not to say that I am above this: I know that I have also seen people suffering and dying on my feed, perhaps felt bad about it, and then ultimately been able to move on with my day. It is uncomfortable to admit, but it is important to recognize.

You can't care equally about everything, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't care about anything. When you see something awful on your feed, take a break and reflect. Write about what you feel, research the context of current events, and look for ways to donate or be active locally. It is ultimately a privileged position for your biggest problem to be feeling emotionally numb to a disaster that exists thousands of miles away. People in Nepal and other countries who are facing the brunt of climate change cannot ignore the consequences of American emissions.

You might not prevent every disaster, but a donation can change lives. At Harvard, resources for research and activism exist and can change lives if affiliates use them. It shocks me when we view international disasters as being wholly separate from us. Harvard has a place in the international community, and we would not be the university we are today without it.

We have an obligation to each other, and to the world, to try to feel something. Being a Harvard student is an impossibly and profoundly privileged experience, and we have to use it.

Anika Gupta '30 (anikagupta@college.harvard.edu) is comping the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Sophia Jo '29

Economical Emotions

Not a how-to guide to optimizing love.

By TIBAH ABID '28

On my way back from my Econometrics section, a classmate told me that a good approach to women is to pick the one that minimizes costs and maximizes utility. In plain language: pick the woman who gives you the most while you give the least.

I thought of Arabic music, specifically Umm Kulthum, the Egyptian singer called Kawkab al-Sharq, the Planet of the East, whose hour-long songs taught the Arab world what love sounds like. In the world I grew up in, love was never chosen like that. It arrived totally, excessively, nearly impossible to optimize.

The same culture that produced Umm Kulthum's songs of boundless love also produced Adel Emam, Egypt's most beloved comedian,

"To the actress in me, it sounded like an obituary. To the economist, like a progress report."

who became something of a prophet. For six decades, his films and plays staged love against the machinery of modern life: bureaucracy, poverty, and politics squeezing the romance out of ordinary people. He played it for laughs, until the laughs started sounding like a diagnosis.

"العواطف ستكون آلية." Emotions will become mechanical.

Adel Emam said this when an interviewer asked him to predict life after 2000. Walking home from section, I started to believe Emam: our emotions were becoming mechanical, maybe even mere calculations.

I am an economics and a neuroscience student at Harvard, but I am also pursuing acting. I fell in love with the craft largely because of Egyptian cinema, a universe where emotions are never treated as data points, but as sweeping, tectonic, astronomical shifts.

To the actress in me, it sounded like an obituary. To the economist, like a progress report. That is the friction, stripped down. It is not just about facing a discipline like economics. It is mainly about facing people who think like that, economically, mechanically, almost robotically, in ordinary life. People who talk about love as a trade, who weigh what a person gives against what a person costs, who want the maximum return for the minimum input. A mind raised on stories runs straight into that. In that upbringing, meaning keeps expanding, feeling is treated as information, and a moment is never just a moment; it carries memory, obligation, symbolism, a whole moral arc behind it. The mechanical mind cuts almost all of that away. The clash isn't a failure of logic, and the alienation that follows isn't a cognitive deficit. It is a cognitive mismatch, a completely different set of defaults about what counts, what matters, and what a person is actually worth. One side reads intensity as meaning. The other reads it as inefficiency.

Consider the cognitive training of a Middle Eastern household. From childhood, you are immersed in a moral and emotional landscape that privileges narrative expansion. Events are rarely treated as isolated or finite; they are swept up into grand moral arcs, communal obligations, and deep symbolic weight. (This is not a claim that Middle Easterners are inherently "more emotional"; it describes a training environment that varies, like any.) For an actor, this is incredibly fertile soil. Through experience-dependent plasticity, the brain learns to treat affective cues as high-value signals. We are trained to lean into the moment's poetry, to amplify the signal.

But economics demands that you flirt with a very different kind of muse: abstraction.

Music best savors the contrast. Take the German pop song by Revolverheld, "Ich lass für dich das Licht an." The title means, "I will leave the light on for you." In the song, love sounds like this: "I leave the light turned on for you, even though it is too bright for me." It is practical, reliable, and deeply efficient. A small sacrifice, clearly stated.

Now turn on "Enta Omri," Umm Kulthum's most famous love song, first released in 1964. The title means "You Are My Life," and the song is a nearly hour-long declaration of love. In one of its best-known lyrics, translated from Arabic, she sings: "You are my life; with your light its dawn begins." This is not a transaction. It is a total, intoxicating, and unbounded reorganization of the self. She does not sing one feeling for three minutes. She stretches it for an hour, repeating it until it becomes your whole world.

When a mind habituated to the scale of Enta Omri meets someone whose training, explicit or implicit, taught them to treat human connection economically, the resulting friction is almost seductive in its complexity. Behavioral economics tries to account for this through "salience bias," noting that humans foolishly overweigh emotionally vivid or symbolically meaningful outcomes. But framing an emotionally rich worldview as a "bias" or "heuristic error" misses the point. It is a model specification error. Models treat as noise what our minds experience as the actual signal.

Mechanistically, neuroscience shows we never assign value purely logically. Emotion and reasoning work in tandem, and a childhood immersed in emotionally charged stories trains the brain to treat feeling intensity as meaningful information. When we sit in a room and force ourselves to optimize within constraints, we are not failing to compute. We pay a real mental and physical price for forcing our deepest valuation system into hibernation.

Ultimately, the challenge isn't to "correct" our emotional minds to make them more compliant for the market, even if mitigating these mismatches might reduce the acute stress that occurs when our core valuation systems are forced into a deep freeze. The real question is whether the disciplines that govern human systems are rich enough to account for the way humans actually assign value.

Something profoundly Kafkaesque about the modern distribution of these cognitive styles: we have built an academic and economic world where some people may optimize flawlessly but live in emotional compression, never experiencing the unbounded depth of an Enta Omri existence.

Conversely, others feel so deeply that the cold language of optimization feels entirely alien. While it is arguably easier to teach a deeply feeling mind how to optimize, capturing that rare capacity to feel profoundly is a far more elusive, complicated, and delicate human art. And if you have to optimize one of the greatest human

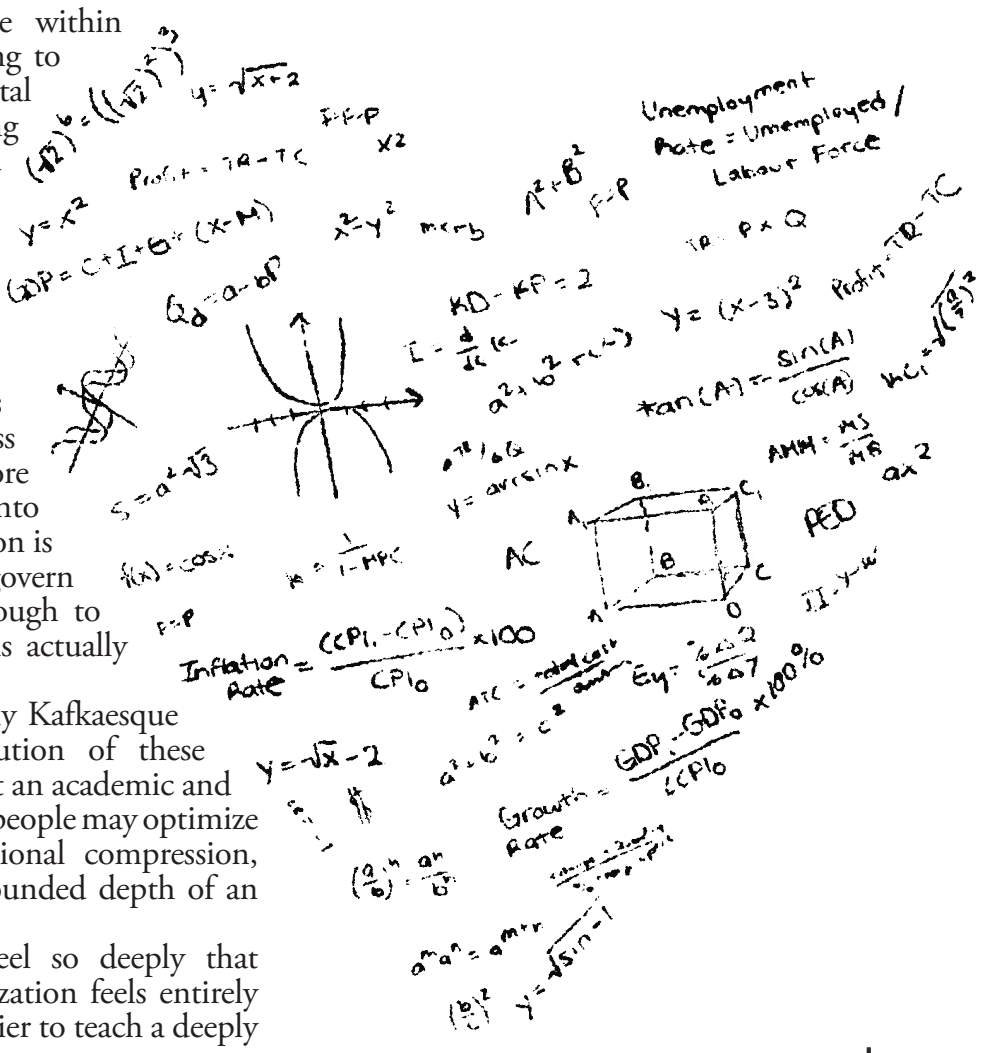
"What remains isn't love; it's accounting. Congratulations! You are an accountant."

emotions, you've already lost it. What remains isn't love; it's accounting. Congratulations! You are an accountant.

If Adel Emam is right and our emotions are doomed to become mechanical, then holding onto our narrative depth may be the ultimate act of defiance. The future of economic modeling may depend less on successfully suppressing the drama of human meaning than on finally giving it a role.

Tibah Abid '28 (tibahabid@college.harvard.edu) is a writer for the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Trischelle Afihene '27







The Black Plague Returns

An ancient killer resurfaces in Russia, along with the panic that surrounds it.

By SALMA GHEITH '30

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has been on edge. Whether it's the suspected outbreaks of Hantavirus, Monkeypox, or bird flu, every couple of months something new to fear appears, a new reason to stock up on an unreasonable amount of toilet paper and canned goods. But are any of our fears justified?

On Oct. 2, 28-year-old laboratory worker Darya Shipilova died of an unconfirmed pneumonia-like illness in Russia. The incident sparked widespread fear across Siberia, resulting in the quarantine of about 200 people who were believed to have been exposed to the disease. Shipilova worked at the Irkutsk Anti-Plague Research Institute of Siberia and the Far East. This drew a lot of attention because this laboratory previously received funding from the Soviet government to develop a biological weapons program.

In April 2025, a U.S. State Department report found that Russia has an offensive biological weapons program, in violation of international agreements. The incident in the lab has raised questions as to whether Russia is finding ways to weaponize the plague, a disease thought to be left in the past of beak-shaped plague masks and medieval hygiene.

The Black Death was a devastating plague pandemic across Eurasia and North Africa from 1346-1353, killing about 25 to 50 million people in Europe (between 30% and 60% of the population). This is one of the most notorious historical disease outbreaks, and it is no wonder so many people work in and around laboratories that continue to study the bacterium that causes it, Yersinia pestis.

The plague has several varieties. Pneumonic implies the infection has spread to the lungs. Some outlets and experts have speculated that Darya Shipilova's death was caused by a pneumonic strain of Yersinia pestis, sparking intense fear across not only Russia, but also around the world.

Many have pointed out the discrepancies between official Russian statements and local and international reporting. The Kremlin insists that the public has nothing to fear. Still, the combination of aggressive quarantines, scrubbed digital evidence, and reports of a laboratory accident gone wrong paints a far more devastating picture.

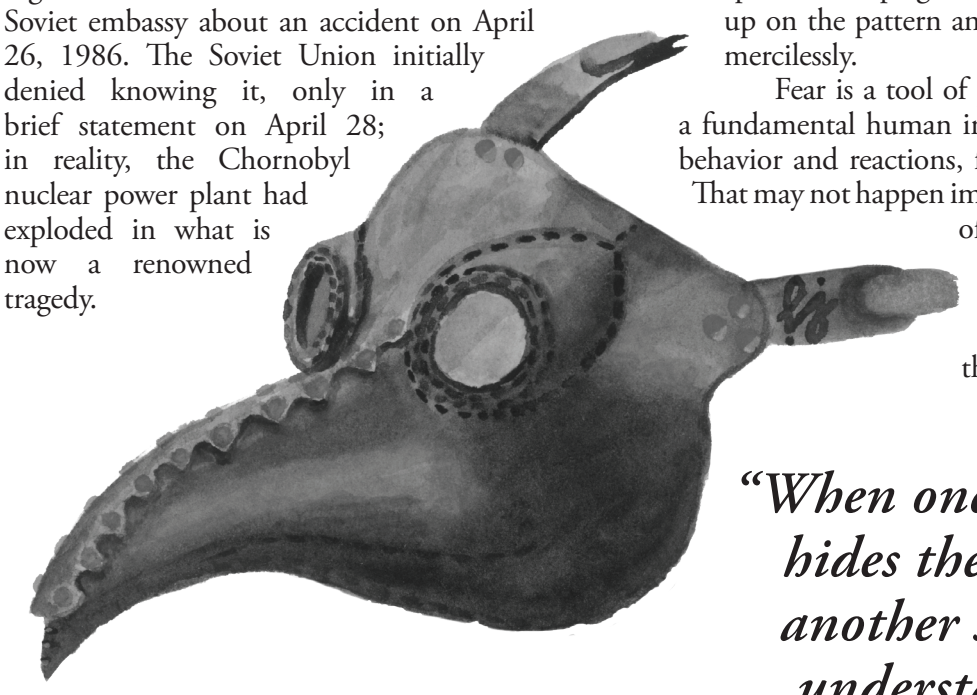
Originally, Russian media reported that Shipilova broke a test tube that contained the bacterium Yersinia pestis, fell ill with "pneumonia of an unknown cause," and then died. Rospotrebnadzor, the Russian Federation's national public health and consumer protection agency, maintains a highly sanitized version of events. However, the story quickly changes as they deny any link to lab activity. Officials claimed that extended testing (without specifying what kind) found no pathogens linked to her professional activity and that no incidents occurred at the Irkutsk Anti-Plague Research Institute.

Russia's note to the World Health Organization states that it found no plague cases and that there is no risk of a global epidemic. However, several holes remain in the story surrounding the broken vial, the quarantines, and the mass panic that followed her untimely death. Although the state claimed it was just an "unknown pneumonia," its physical response was massive. A regional hospital was entirely quarantined and halted all patient admissions and discharges, all while government officials forcibly quarantined anywhere from dozens to hundreds of Shipilova's contacts.

On Saturday, Oct. 3, regional authorities reportedly posted a message on Telegram acknowledging "unofficial information about a confirmed plague case in the city of Shelekhov." They deleted the post two hours later. Even as the government continued to downplay the situation nationally and internationally, the director of the Irkutsk Aluminum plant in Shelekhov posted on Telegram about a mask mandate for staff. "Better be safe than sorry," he wrote, revealing a deep-seated local panic.

Officials have presented the situation as calm and localized, even as they cover up the rapid, forceful isolation of up to 200 people. The incident has undoubtedly raised suspicions about reports coming out of Russia, making people wonder whether or not this is a reason to panic.

The suspicion surrounding the truth of the Russian government's claims reflects a broader pattern of inaccurate information the Russian government provides about disasters. In 1986, Sweden detected high levels of radioactive fallout and asked the Soviet embassy about an accident on April 26, 1986. The Soviet Union initially denied knowing it, only in a brief statement on April 28; in reality, the Chornobyl nuclear power plant had exploded in what is now a renowned tragedy.



A history of secrecy and dishonesty around national and international crises has bred deep distrust of Russia across the international community. The case for covering up a plague outbreak is weak. Without full transparency and communication, neither other countries nor the international community could sufficiently prepare.

Even the best-case scenario still sows seeds of doubt and distrust. If Russia is telling the truth, its long history of unreliability makes that truth hard to believe. President Donald Trump has briefly acknowledged the incident, albeit with more than a little confusion.

More outlets point out that Donald Trump and other government officials seem not to understand the difference between the pneumonic plague and pneumonia. In a comment on the outbreak, President Trump said, "It's a rough disease. We used to be able to control it, but somehow those microbes have gotten stronger and smarter. The germs have really become relatively stronger than they were, and things that used to work on pneumonia don't work as well anymore." This suggests Trump may have confused the pneumonic plague with pneumonia, which doesn't inspire confidence in how officials are communicating about the outbreak.

This response does not necessarily inspire confidence that Americans are getting accurate information from government officials; rather, it fosters a vicious cycle. Knowing accurate information depends on receiving accurate information from the Russian government in the first place. This information gap breeds fear and raises the question of who is providing the incorrect information: the U.S., Russia, or both?

Fearing a mysterious disease is not ridiculous in theory. Lab safety, future outbreaks, bioweapons, and Russian opacity are all valid concerns in an increasingly volatile political climate. However, this ignores several mitigating factors that argue against fearmongering.

The World Health Organization rated the risk of spread as low for Russia and very low for Europe. The plague is highly treatable with antibiotics, and no person-to-person spread has been confirmed. While the lack of confirmed person-to-person spread may reflect limited information, tabloid "plague panic" narratives must be scrutinized against the scientifically proven risk of the disease.

During international crises, governments often go to great lengths to ensure safety and security. But governments also use fear as a tool, shaping behavior through information. Russia and the West both shape the story; Russia uses information to downplay the risk, while Western rhetoric and media strategically sow distaste for Russia by amplifying rhetoric or questioning the government's motives. While Trump has not directly done this in reference to the pneumonic plague, the general public has picked up on the pattern and questions Russia's motives mercilessly.

Fear is a tool of political control. It leverages a fundamental human instinct to manipulate public behavior and reactions, further consolidating power. That may not happen immediately, but every instance of fear adds to a collection of moments that become fodder for political moves. When people are afraid, their natural desire for safety often overrides their demand for individual liberties and logic, making them more willing to accept certain rhetoric and authoritative measures, increased surveillance, or aggressive foreign policies.

> ***"When one government hides the truth and another struggles to understand it, the public fills the gap with speculation, and speculation breeds panic."***

So what do we have to fear? The answer is nothing and everything. The pneumonic plague itself appears to pose a low risk to the public. It is treatable, and no evidence suggests it is spreading. The lasting danger is the misinformation that surrounds the incident. When one government hides the truth and another struggles to understand it, the public fills the gap with speculation, and speculation breeds panic.

Darya Shipilova's death may never be fully understood. But the answers about lab safety, bioweapons, and who we can trust to tell us the truth are a different issue entirely. We should not stockpile toilet paper until we get answers; instead, we should stay informed, stay skeptical, and refuse to let fear think for us.

Salma Gheith '30 (salmagheith@college.harvard.edu) is comping the "Harvard Independent."

Graphic by Lola Selberg '30

We Are Eating Purple Gold: The Gentrification of Survival Foods

The hidden human cost behind our favorite global food trends.

By AADIT SHRIVASTAVA '30

Between rushing from midterm office hours to an evening club meeting, I walk down JFK Street for a quick sweet treat from Ten One or Playa Bowls. Yet behind the minimalist packaging and pastel Instagram marketing lies a jarring paradox: the digital hype machine demands cheap quantities of global staples such as açaí and ube, while the communities that have preserved them for centuries are collapsing under the weight of our consumption.

This phenomenon is not simply an accidental byproduct of globalization; it follows a pattern of how Western markets sanitize heritage. The story of modern food trends is not one of cultural appreciation; it is a story of how Western capital strips away history, disrupts local economies, and leaves origin communities to bear the cost of our cravings. At its core, this extraction relies on consumer detachment, encouraging us to enjoy convenient global trends without accounting for the structural costs behind them.

"This phenomenon is not simply an accidental byproduct of globalization; it follows a pattern of how Western markets sanitize heritage."

I went to a school in Livingston, New Jersey, where working a shift behind a Playa Bowls counter was a local rite of passage. But long before açaí was frozen into a heavily sweetened, purple purée, it was a vital, calorie-dense survival food for riverside Caboclo communities in the Amazon Basin. Harvested from wild palm trees lining the floodplains, unsweetened açaí was consumed as a savory, earthy staple, providing essential fats and daily sustenance for working families.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, in the Philippines, heirloom ube varieties served as resilient, starch-rich lifelines that sustained rural communities through punishing typhoons, famines, and war. Cultivated for necessity, these foods were the hard-won products of generations of agricultural knowledge. Now, my friends and I go to one of the many bubble tea shops in Harvard Square, and even to Starbucks, to try their ube drinks. To be honest, the purple color makes it look a lot tastier than it actually is.

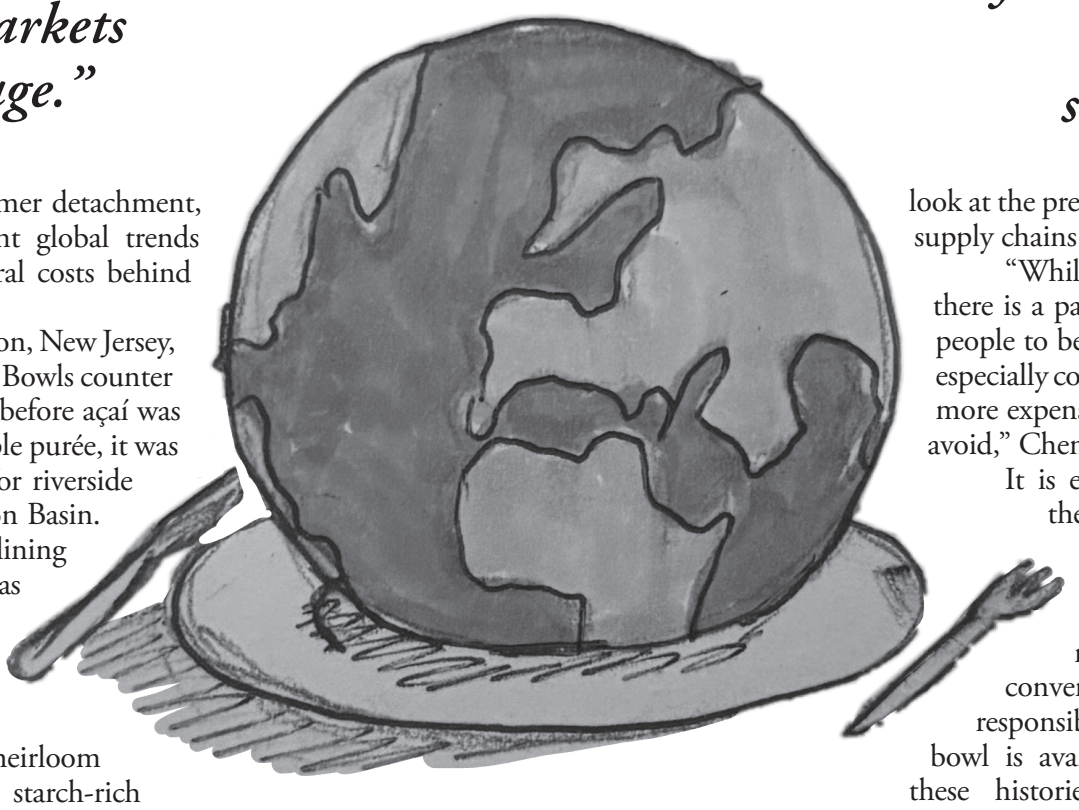
When these foods enter the Western market, however, their histories of survival get erased. The multi-billion-dollar food and wellness industry strips away an ingredient's cultural context and repackages it behind flashy health claims, such as "low calories" or "antioxidant power." Açaí was transformed from a daily source of working-class nourishment into an expensive dessert bowl topped with goji berries, and ube reduced to neon-purple food dyes and flavorings for market lattes and pastries.

This conceptual erasure carries devastating consequences for the communities that originally cultivated these plants. In the Amazon, soaring international demand for açaí has driven local prices up so dramatically that low-income riverside families are often priced out of their primary nutritional source.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, climate vulnerabilities and intense export pressures mean that local producers struggle to grow enough crops, while multinational brands use cheap purple sweet potatoes and synthetic flavorings.

This pattern shows how origin communities absorb environmental costs and supply disruptions, while Western corporations extract the profits. This dynamic directly attacks food sovereignty, the fundamental right of communities to define their own agricultural and dietary systems. With unprecedented demand for crops like açaí and ube, traditional farming ecosystems are reoriented toward export markets at the expense of local livelihoods. Origin communities lose agricultural autonomy, and domestic networks bear the financial losses while Western buyers remain protected.

Even here in Cambridge, these global shifts have shaped how ordinary citizens interact with these ingredients. When other cultures' foods are stripped of their history, American and European consumers' connection to them becomes an everyday transaction and an aesthetic Instagram story. Because of how food corporations package these crops, we engage with these foods through the lens of personal enjoyment and wellness. For many consumers relying on accessible corporate chains, this mode of eating is an inevitable outcome of living in a convenient, globally connected food system.



Defenders of the modern food industry frame this global phenomenon as a triumph of multiculturalism. Trade advocates argue that exporting staple crops from the Global South opens vital international markets, boosts developing economies, and fosters cross-cultural appreciation in places like Harvard Square. In theory, sharing the world's flavors should bridge cultural divides.

However, true cross-cultural appreciation relies on reciprocity, equity, and respect, none of which are present when a corporate chain upcharges for a synthetic bowl-version of a culture's survival food. But why should the Harvard community halfway across the world care about the supply chains behind a morning smoothie bowl?

"As a student, you have many constraints in your limitations, like how much time you have to get things, to your health, or your budget," Rory Liu '30 explained to the "Harvard Independent," detailing the factors that go into a quick bite in Harvard Square. Liu's perspective highlights why consumers choose larger companies that can produce goods at lower prices.

"The onus is only on the corporations themselves and giving back to that community from sourcing ethically [or] from working with smaller businesses," Liu added.

Yet, corporations do not operate in a vacuum. "I think that there is something really interesting with how social media pushes out the most flashy and most vibrant colors of a culture," Raiden Chen '30 said to the "Harvard Independent." He also noted that selective consumption encourages people "to just look at the pretty colors and not really think about the supply chains that might be hurting other people."

"However, true cross-cultural appreciation relies on reciprocity, equity, and respect, none of which are present when a corporate chain upcharges for a synthetic bowl-version of a culture's survival food."

"While companies should be held responsible, there is a part that relies on students and everyday people to be aware of the foods they're consuming, especially considering that ube and açaí are definitely more expensive items that you can very, very easily avoid," Chen added.

It is easy, and perhaps comforting, to view these trends as an organic triumph of global exchange or purely the fault of corporations. True consumer awareness, though, requires recognizing the structural costs of our convenience. We cannot absolve ourselves of responsibility simply because a sugary smoothie bowl is available between classes. Understanding these histories doesn't mean abandoning every comfort—many small businesses also sell the same products ethically, but they may take effort to find.

Until we look beyond aesthetics and convenience and demand accountability from the systems that profit off erasure, our eating habits will implicitly cause the displacement of other communities across the globe.

Aadit Shrivastava '30 (aaditshrivastava@college.harvard.edu) really does not like Playa Bowls.

Graphic by Emma Crago '28

Exploring Worldwide Hometowns: Negaunee, Michigan

Life in Michigan's lesser-known peninsula.

By OLIVIA LUNSETH '28

Have you ever asked someone from Michigan where they're from, only for them to show you with their hand? They probably made a mitten with one palm and explained it was the state's outline after noticing your raised eyebrow. But this representation forgets that Michigan has another peninsula, one that often gets overlooked: the Upper Peninsula, or the U.P., as we locals call it. It makes up roughly one-third of Michigan's landmass but is home to only about 3% of the state's population. I'm not surprised to be one of only two U.P. students at Harvard. Many people have never visited it, let alone considered it home.

Bordered by three of the Great Lakes (Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, and Lake Huron) and covered by approximately 8.8 million acres of forest, I'm proud to be from the U.P. I'm from Negaunee, a town of about 4,650 people, just 15 minutes from Marquette, the U.P.'s largest city with a population of around 22,000.

The U.P. shares one area code—906—which is unusual for such a large area. Detroit, Chicago, and Minneapolis are the closest major cities, and each is at least a six-hour drive away. Many people in my town consider Green Bay, Wisconsin, the closest city, but even that's a three-hour drive.

"In such a remote area, with so much wilderness surrounding us, hunting and fishing are a normal part of life."

In such a remote area, with so much wilderness surrounding us, hunting and fishing are a normal part of life; they are traditions that begin from an early age. I have pictures of myself holding dead fish when I was only 2 or 3 years old; I learned to gut a deer when I was 12, something that might shock Harvard students but is completely normal in Negaunee. My grandparents' meals often came straight from the woods. Venison, bear meat, grouse, and brook trout were common items on the dinner table.

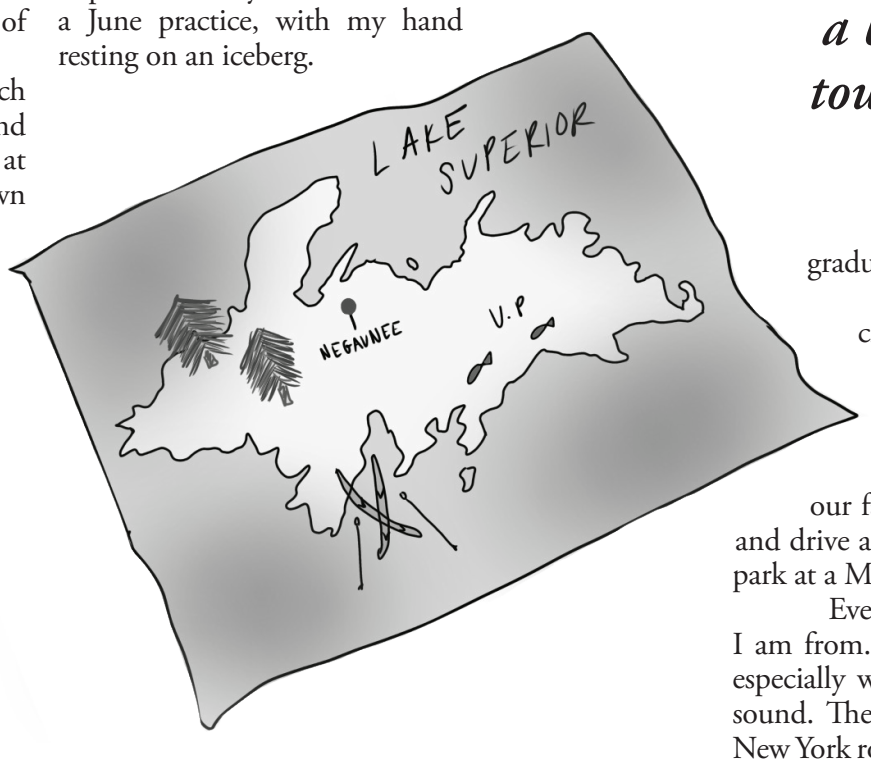
Some years, nearly a third of my school would be absent on Nov. 15, the opening day of Michigan's firearm deer season. If you found yourself in the building, you could expect half the staff to be replaced by substitute teachers as everyone headed to camp, hoping to use their deer tag on opening day. It was practically a school holiday.

The U.P. is also known for its snow, with some areas seeing snowfall that sometimes exceeds 250 inches a year. I spent many of my childhood winters ski-racing at Marquette Mountain. In such a small town, it's common to stay involved in the activities you grew up doing, and I am proud to continue that by coaching younger skiers when I go home for winter break.

When I reflect on my childhood, many of my winter memories involve skiing. I remember going to the hill with my dad and sister when I was little and seeing if we could stay from open to close. Some years, we even got snow in our backyard before the ski hill opened. My friends and I would use shovels to build jumps and ski there instead.

Skiing is not the only way to spend a winter in the U.P. The sledding hill in our yard saw plenty of action, and it was not unusual to see people figure skating or playing hockey on the ice in front of the old Ore Dock on Lake Superior. But winter could also be long. I remember Halloween blizzards and throwing a fit in elementary school because my mom would not let me go trick-or-treating without a jacket.

The snow does not always disappear when winter is supposed to end, either. In March of this year, a blizzard brought 36 inches of snow to the U.P. When I got home from school last June, small snowbanks were still on the ground in our yard. This wasn't the first year winter has lingered this long: my dad has a photo of me at age 10, standing in Lake Superior in my soccer uniform after a June practice, with my hand resting on an iceberg.



You might be wondering why people chose to settle in a place with so many trees, such brutal winters, and relatively few people. For my hometown, the answer lies beneath the ground.

In 1844, a government surveying crew led by William Austin Burt was mapping the U.P. when its compasses began behaving strangely. Vast deposits of iron ore beneath the surface interfered with the magnetic needles. This discovery revealed the Marquette Iron Range, a 33-mile-long iron ore deposit that runs through Negaunee and Ishpeming. Within a few years, the Jackson Mine opened near present-day Negaunee, launching Michigan's iron mining industry.

Iron ore transformed the region. Shipped across the Great Lakes on lake freighters, it supplied the iron and steel industries that built the nation's railroads, bridges, factories, and skyscrapers. Copper mining was also a major U.P. industry. The Keweenaw Peninsula (the northernmost section of the U.P.) is known as "the Copper Country" due to the large number of copper mines in the area. Mining brought immigrants from across Europe, including Finland, Sweden, Ireland, Italy, and England.

The mining industry has changed considerably since the discovery of iron ore in 1844. Many historic mines, including the Jackson Mine, have closed as deposits depleted. As the mines left, so did many of the people. Ghost towns built for the mining boom dot the western U.P.

The U.P.'s share of the state's population has fallen from 11.5% to about 3% today. The Eagle Mine and Tilden Mine remain active, providing jobs for locals and drawing workers and their families to the area.

The mines are impossible to forget in everyday life. I remember sitting in class in middle and high school, feeling the ground shake, but no one commented on it or even looked up. It was just a blast from the Tilden Mine a few miles away.

Even my high school, Negaunee High School, was built on the site of the former Mather "B" Mine, which closed in 1979. When the building was converted into a high school, my mom's class graduated from the new building in 1987.

"Coming to Harvard was a big change from my town of 4,650 people."

Coming to Harvard was a big change from my town of 4,650 people. For starters, growing up in the U.P., cars were central to my social life. In a town where there wasn't usually much to do, driving around with friends was one of our favorite pastimes. We would pick up food and drive along the lake with the windows down, or park at a Meijer or Target and talk for hours.

Even the way I speak can give away where I am from. I have somewhat of a Canadian twang, especially when I pronounce words with a long "a" sound. The first time I said "bagel" in front of my New York roommate, I thought she was going to faint.

Before coming to Harvard, I rarely thought about how unusual life in the U.P. might seem to "trolls" (people who live south of the Mackinac Bridge). Long winters, mine blasts during the school day, and fall hunting were simply part of growing up. Living in Boston has made me appreciate how much these experiences shaped my childhood and my connection to home. Now, when someone asks where I'm from, I use both hands to map Michigan, explaining that I grew up in the lesser-known peninsula—the place above the famous mitten.

I may not move back to Negaunee, but wherever life takes me, I will always be proud to call myself a Yooper.

Olivia Lunseth '28 (olivialunseth@college.harvard.edu) still doesn't know how to say "bagel" the correct way.

Graphic by Nuala Mernin '29

Painting a Nation: Mexican Muralism and the Making of a National Identity

How Mexico transformed public art into a national political movement.

By JOCELYNE DELGADO '28

In 1932, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera was commissioned to paint a mural in the center of Manhattan's Rockefeller Center.

Fast forward two years, and workers are chiseling the mural off the wall.

"Man at the Crossroads" was intended to depict the many sides of contemporary social and scientific culture. The piece features workmen and machinery, wealthy socialite women, a Russian May Day rally, and even a portrait of communist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin. Rivera hoped to show the struggle between capitalism and socialism, placing the viewer at the crossroads between the two systems.

"Public walls became canvases that depicted how Mexicans understood their past and how they imagined their future."

Yet this same political message led to the mural's demise. During the Great Depression, economic instability intensified growing debates over capitalism and communism. Many capitalist elites feared a shift to communism as capitalism's failures became apparent. The Manhattan Rockefeller Center was a landmark of American capitalism, thus making Lenin's portrait quite controversial.

As public backlash grew, Nelson Rockefeller ordered Rivera to remove the portrait. When Rivera declared he would rather have it destroyed than mutilated, that is exactly what Rockefeller did. Shortly after, workers chiseled the mural off the wall, and Rivera was fired.

Rivera, however, was not the only Mexican muralist to push the boundaries of political art.

In the 1920s, Mexico struggled to rebuild itself. The Mexican Revolution began in 1910 and left the country with a fractured sense of identity. What it meant to be Mexican in the aftermath of a revolution that exposed divisions of class and race was still an unanswered question.

José Vasconcelos, Mexico's Secretary of Public Education at the time, sought to answer this question. In his book, "La Raza Cósmica," he advanced mestizaje ideology, the idea that Mexico's identity fuses indigenous, European, and African ancestries and cultures. Vasconcelos urged Mexicans to embrace their blended background and, in turn, use it as a source of national identity and pride. To spread his vision, Vasconcelos turned to the walls.

In 1921, he became a leading supporter of the government-sponsored Mexican Muralism Movement, which commissioned artists to paint the stories of Mexico's indigenous past, colonial history, and revolutionary struggle on public buildings. At the time, most of the population was still illiterate. Politically charged murals offered an accessible way for political and historical narratives to reach border populations. Vasconcelos hoped these murals would spark national pride. Public walls became canvases that depicted how Mexicans understood their past and how they imagined their future.

Los Tres Grandes—Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros—led the Mexican Muralism Movement. From the 1920s to the 1950s, they pioneered the movement and helped establish a national identity rooted in iconographic depictions of non-European heroes in Mexico's past. Each artist had their own individual style, yet they all shared one mission: to answer what it means to be Mexican.

Many of Rivera's pieces told the stories of workers—farmers, peasants, miners, and industrial laborers — who had been neglected in Mexico's official history books. He is best known for his works "The History of Mexico, Sueño de una Tarde Dominical en la Alameda Central," and "El Cargador de Flores." In each piece, Rivera placed the ordinary people at the center. Rivera depicted everything from the Aztec world to the post-revolution one. His message was that the ordinary worker built a powerful, culturally rich nation.

Building on Rivera, Clemente Orozco focused on class struggle and the hardships of everyday life. His most recognized works include "Prometheus," "Catharsis," and "Zapatistas." Clemente Orozco was explicit in his storytelling. He wanted to show the unfiltered post-revolutionary Mexico. He did this by utilizing a highly expressionistic form of social realism. Orozco was not a man afraid to depict violence, pain, and hardship that come along with building a national identity.

Siqueiros was a former soldier who became a muralist. His work was far from subtle and deeply rooted in a left-wing perspective. He is best known for his works "Portrait of the Bourgeoisie," "From Porfirism to Revolution," and "Nueva Democracia." Having participated directly in the revolution, he aimed not to tell a story, as his counterparts did, but to push people to act through his artwork. Beyond being an artist, Siqueiros was also a community organizer who led unions. He even returned to the military and commanded several brigades during the Spanish Civil War.

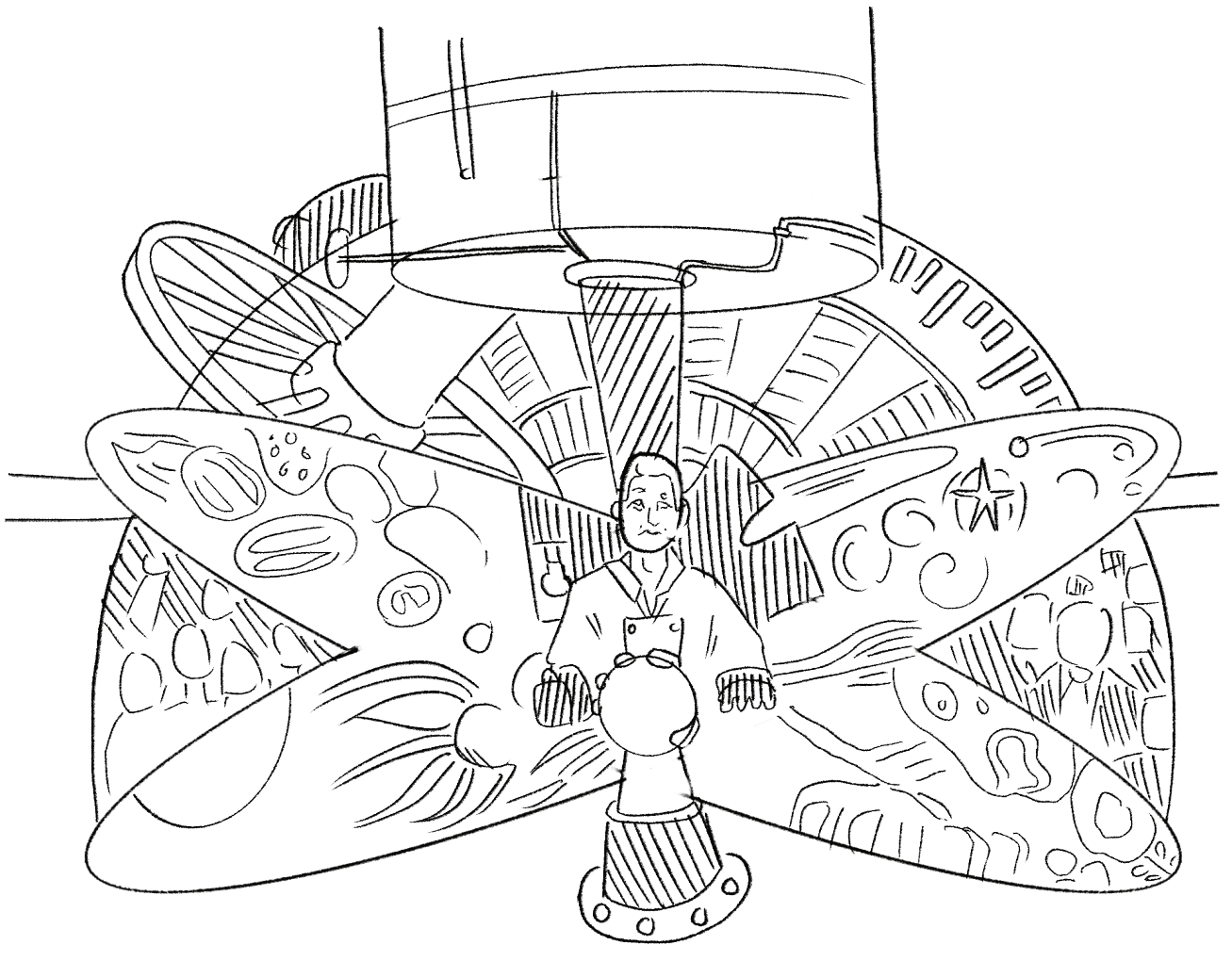
"Identity is not set in stone. It is painted, argued over, and repainted."

However, the movement itself was never just black or white—for all its vibrant colors, it was full of contradictions. Since most murals during this movement were government-funded, it raises the question: Where does state-sponsored political art cross the line between resistance and propaganda? Here, the government called the shots on which stories the public walls should tell. Mestizaje celebrated the one blended race that Mexicans are a part of. Yet, some argue that this truth sidelines the identity of existing Afro-Mexican and living indigenous communities into one government-sanctioned version of a national identity.

Los Tres Grandes are also all men. Female artists, such as Aurora Reyes Flores and Frida Kahlo, often spent their careers in the shadows of their male counterparts. Experts often consider Reyes Flores the first Mexican muralist, yet they don't place her on the same pedestal as Los Tres Grandes. Kahlo, an artistic trailblazer of the feminist movement who helped shape Mexican women's identity, was often cast as "Rivera's wife" rather than an art patron.

While these critiques hold truth, the contradictions are part of what makes the movement so powerful. The Mexican Muralist Movement helped display how complex and difficult it is to shape a national identity. Identity is not set in stone. It is painted, argued over, and repainted.

Today, you can visit the mural that once got Rivera fired in Mexico City. It is now known as "Man, Controller of the Universe." It was repainted in 1934, Lenin and all, and hangs at Palacio de Bellas Artes. This is just one story of how a nation's story may be censored, but never fully erased.



Jocelyne Delgado '28 (jidelgado@college.harvard.edu) visited "Man, Controller of the Universe" in all its glory two summers ago.

Graphic by Cameron Bernier '29

Harvard's Take on "Othello"

In Hyperion Shakespeare Company's production, love and violence are closer than they seem.

By ANNA MOGEL '30

In Harvard College's "Othello," produced by Hyperion Shakespeare Company, power is visible before anyone explains it. The opening scene begins with Roderigo (River Wynne '30) rowing a boat while Iago (George Atkin '28) sits upright beside him, holding himself above the man doing all of the work. Against ominous music, designed by Brian Hawkins '30, the imbalance is immediate and grows increasingly physical as the play unfolds.

Presented Oct. 15 to 18 at the Agassiz Theater, the production, directed by Nike Okafor '27, marked HSC's official return to campus after a three-year hiatus from live theatrical productions; the group paused due to financial and organizational crises that left it struggling with internal structure and funding. The play explores betrayal, racial prejudice, and insecurity; it follows Othello (Siza Gule '30), a military general whose marriage to Desdemona (Milena Manocchia '28) Iago undermines by exploiting Othello's insecurities to provoke jealousy.

Leaders of "Othello" applied this intricate plot to their pre-production strategies for the cast and crew.

"How can I make it such that [the actors] embody their roles, but embody their roles in a way that doesn't fall into tropes and like falls into clichés, and also that opens dialogue and communication for the general community and public," Director Nike Okafor '27 said in an interview with the "Harvard Independent."

"The play explores betrayal, racial prejudice, and insecurity."

An Overview

Shakespeare based "Othello's" plot on a 1565 Italian prose novella, "Un Capitano Moro," by Giovanni Battista Giraldi. Shakespeare wrote "Othello" in the Jacobean Era, from 1603 to 1604, setting the tragedy against the backdrop of the Venetian-Turkish Wars.

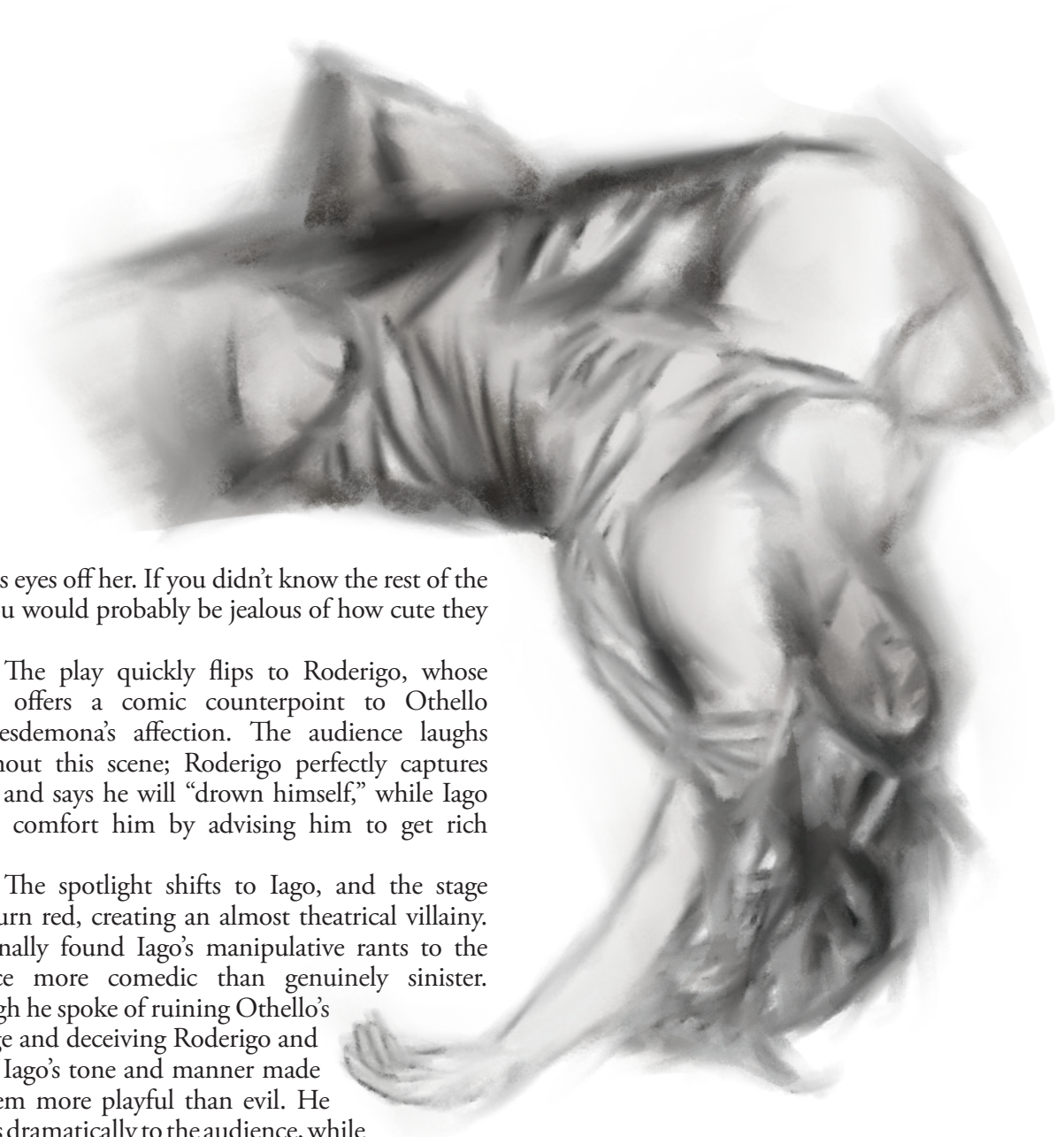
"Othello" begins in Venice, a lucrative trade hub at the time. The play later shifts to Cyprus, a Venetian military outpost threatened by the Ottoman Empire.

Throughout the play, Othello is commonly referred to as a "Moor," which was a term loosely used in Elizabethan times to denote people of North African descent, Muslim faith, or dark complexion. The juxtaposition of black-and-white imagery runs throughout the play and marks the difference between Othello and his white European peers. Although Othello's racial differences are heavily alluded to, he is still seen as a noble figure of great authority, respected and admired by those around him.

Act 1: Brabantio's Worst Nightmare

Roderigo and Iago remain at the center of the stage as Brabantio (Henry Aronofsky '28) stumbles out of his house wearing nothing but a nightgown and a hat that weirdly resembles Santa Claus's, costumes designed by Sam Park '29.

The stage lights dim, arranged by Clare Cho '30 and Sadie Polk '30, and the scene shifts to senators gathering to discuss the Turkish fleet. The Senate pokes fun at Brabantio, who stands as far from Othello as possible, underscoring their tension. As Desdemona enters, her face lights up, and she and Othello embrace (escalating into an intense makeout session). Their physical closeness makes their love feel genuine. Othello gently holds her hands and never takes his eyes off her. If you didn't know the rest of the play, you would probably be jealous of how cute they are.



The play quickly flips to Roderigo, whose despair offers a comic counterpoint to Othello and Desdemona's affection. The audience laughs throughout this scene; Roderigo perfectly captures despair and says he will "drown himself," while Iago tries to comfort him by advising him to get rich instead.

The spotlight shifts to Iago, and the stage lights turn red, creating an almost theatrical villainy. I personally found Iago's manipulative rants to the audience more comedic than genuinely sinister. Although he spoke of ruining Othello's marriage and deceiving Roderigo and Cassio, Iago's tone and manner made him seem more playful than evil. He gestures dramatically to the audience, while stereotypical horror music plays in the background, making it seem as though the production itself isn't taking Iago seriously.

Act 2: The Worst Happy Hour Ever

After a storm destroys the Turkish fleet, folk music and drunken antics fill the stage, establishing a warm, comedic atmosphere. The characters gather around in an energetic dance. In this scene, Iago and Emilia (Elianna Carvalho '29), a married couple, make their affection for each other apparent: they dance at the center of the stage and cannot keep smiles off their faces. They also joke together offstage—a natural relationship built through an intentional rehearsal process.

"A lot of people play him as just evil, but that's not it. That's not the extent of him. There's a reason why he wants Othello to be destroyed."

- Atkin '28

"In terms of navigating the relationship with Iago, we've probably changed that appearance throughout the entirety of the rehearsal process. Where at first Iago was a little meaner to her, but then that changed because there still needed to be a justification for why [Emilia] cares so much for him," Carvalho said to the "Harvard Independent."

That affection makes Iago's later treatment of Emilia more unsettling. His behavior toward Cassio (Corvus Chanoine '30) also resists a straightforward portrayal of him as simply evil. After Iago tries to pressure Cassio into getting drunk and a brawl breaks out, Iago seems genuinely concerned as he tries to comfort him. He looks at him endearingly and tries to make him feel better about being a drunkard.

"A lot of people play him as just evil, but that's not it. That's not the extent of him. There's a reason why he wants Othello to be destroyed," Atkin added, emphasizing unseen traits of his character.

I found myself seeing more than just Iago's evil side during the play. By the end, I realized I didn't have many negative feelings toward him. His initial relationship with Emilia, his comedic moments with Roderigo, and his apparent momentary concern for Cassio made him more likable than I expected. He would occasionally break into a genuine smile or laugh, and I found those moments almost heartwarming, making it difficult to reconcile his charm with the cruelty of his plan toward Othello.

Act 3: The Handkerchief of Doom

The last time we see Othello act grounded is when he and Iago work on letters to send to the Venetian state. They initially sit far apart in identical chairs, with Iago mimicking Othello's posture. Iago begins to plant seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind about infidelity between Desdemona and Cassio; the distance between them shrinks. Eventually, Iago stands behind Othello, almost like the devil on his shoulder. Iago now towers over Othello, representing the newfound power he has over him as he prompts his jealousy and insecurity to take over.

Othello reveals his detachment from his body. Despite his love for Desdemona, he cannot control his jealousy and insecurity, which is embodied through his trembling hand.

"Act 3, Scene 3 specifically plays a really pivotal moment to, like, me displaying that insecurity to people, and that's what I think will make everything

sort of be understood by the audience at the points at which they can sort of like see that within me, like the sort of vulnerability before I even believe it to be true," Gule explained.

Desdemona enters the stage and gives Othello her handkerchief to help soothe his headache. After Othello drops Desdemona's handkerchief on the ground, Emilia anxiously runs over to pick it up to give to Iago. A major turning point in Iago and Emilia's relationship follows. As Iago reaches for the handkerchief, Emilia kisses him, which he quickly wipes off. The play dramatizes the immediate shift in Emilia's feelings towards Iago: her body composure

"But the very essence of just, like, feeling that incredible sense of betrayal is something that I hope to convey in a way that is empathetic, so that the audience understands it."

- Gule '30

immediately becomes more closed, and she looks down at the ground, avoiding further eye contact with Iago. She then lunges at Iago and tries to yank the handkerchief from his grasp, but is unsuccessful.

"I never asked myself why she doesn't tell Desdemona about the handkerchief. That was actually a question Stephen Greenblatt (a Harvard English professor) posed to me, and it sort of changed the way I thought about Emilia," Carvalho said.

Emilia was clearly in a difficult position throughout the play, torn between being a faithful wife and a good friend. During the handkerchief scene, Emilia and Iago had stood on opposite sides of the stage. She repeatedly glanced between Iago, Othello, and Desdemona, smiling when she saw the couple in love but continuously checking in on Iago, who never looked at her. Her pained expression made her divided loyalties apparent. Her two roles seemed impossible to reconcile, as her husband is determined to ruin both Othello and Desdemona's lives.

I found Emilia's denial about her husband believable; she clearly looked up to and respected him, which made it hard for her to see his cruelty. Her reluctance about telling Desdemona about the handkerchief also seemed understandable to me. Doing so would mean confronting not only her own misjudgment of Iago, but also the fact that she had unknowingly helped set the tragedy in motion, causing suffering to Othello and Desdemona, whom she clearly adores.

Act 4: The Culmination

In this act, Othello's physical performance changes dramatically, and the audience sees the full extremity of his jealousy as his body seizes from emotional overload. During a conversation between Iago and Othello, Iago feeds Othello graphic, agonizing lies about Desdemona and Cassio. While Iago maintains composure and eye contact, Othello begins to pace erratically, breathing heavily, twitching, and eventually collapsing to the ground.

This scene illustrates jealousy as something physical: it becomes a loss of bodily control and a state that consumes Othello. The production emphasizes Othello's inability to control his hand tremors.

"But the very essence of just, like, feeling that incredible sense of betrayal is something that I hope to convey in a way that is empathetic, so that the audience understands it," Gule said.

After Othello snaps and physically strikes Desdemona, they embrace again at center stage, but their proximity is now threatening; Desdemona flinches at Othello's touch, especially when he holds her face in his hands. While Othello yells at Desdemona and calls her filthy names, she maintains her posture, keeps her gaze level, and never backs down in her defense.

"I think it was really important for me to make sure that she wasn't passive in that, because it's in fact her struggle for justice that makes it so tragic. I think it's so exciting that we, in the text, get to see her say, 'I never did this. I was true,'" Manocchia explained.

"She explicitly has those opportunities to stand up for herself. So it was important for me to, I think, take that cue and do it in her justice, in terms of playing those lines and playing her as an individual, as someone who is self-possessed."

When I read Othello, I saw Desdemona primarily as a victim. But in Harvard's production, she is far from passive; I saw her as a confident, self-assured woman who did no wrong to anyone. She stands at eye level with Othello and draws herself closer to him rather than backing away. Her all-white outfit suggests a virginal, innocent side. Still, when I left the play, I thought of Desdemona not just as a victim of Othello's jealousy, but as a woman who would not sacrifice her personal integrity to appease her husband.

Act 5: The Killing

The final act brings the production's central contradiction into sharpest focus. Desdemona lies asleep on a bed center stage, surrounded by bright light. Othello enters the room and gently caresses Desdemona's hair as he looks at her lovingly. The lighting turns red, and Othello begins to choke her, maintaining direct eye contact as he kills her. In this scene, Othello's tenderness towards Desdemona exists alongside his violence towards her.

After Emilia reveals Desdemona's innocence, he stumbles around the stage, holding his hand to his forehead, grasping at his clothing, and clutching his stomach. Before he kills himself, he makes his love for Desdemona apparent. He kneels on the ground, shaking and weeping over her. The physical hierarchy that once placed him above her dissolves: he comes down to her level and dies on the other side of her bed.

The production's use of an uncut script, memorized in just three weeks, is ambitious. More importantly, its staging gives Shakespeare's familiar tragedy a clear, physical language. The production weaves love, jealousy, betrayal, and insecurity into a compelling interpretation that complicates its characters and elicits multiple rounds of heavy laughter from the audience.

"When I read Othello, I saw Desdemona primarily as a victim. But in Harvard's production, she is far from passive."

"I thought everyone would have approached this more stoically, but we're laughing all the time. We're making jokes. We're making each other laugh," Carvalho said. "It's been such a fun experience."

Anna Mogel '30 (amogel@college.harvard.edu) finally understood a Shakespeare play.

Graphic by Christiana Zembrowski '28

Photo by Sam Park '29



Exploring Worldwide Hometowns: Hong Kong

A city that keeps changing.

By AUDREY CHENG '30

When humidity suffocates me and the air smells of seawater tinged with garbage, I know I am home.

This is probably not how the tourism board would introduce the city. They would want to show you Hong Kong Island across Victoria Harbor at night, with its bright skyscrapers backed by mountains. Of course, these attractions make up the Hong Kong I know and love—but so do the wet markets, the bamboo scaffolding, and the overly aggressive air-conditioning that makes you regret wearing shorts despite 100-degree weather.

Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China along its southern coast, packing about 7.5 million people into just 430 square miles. It is one of the world's most densely populated places, which explains both the skyscrapers and the soaring rent. Its mix of Chinese and Western influences comes from its history as a trading port and more than 150 years of British colonial rule.

I grew up on Hong Kong Island, in a small neighborhood north of Happy Valley, and left for boarding school in the United Kingdom when I was 11. Since then, I have only returned home two or three times a year for the longer school holidays.

"Of course, these attractions make up the Hong Kong I know and love—but so do the wet markets, the bamboo scaffolding, and the overly aggressive air-conditioning that makes you regret wearing shorts despite 100-degree weather."

I used to feel ashamed of telling people I was from Hong Kong, like it was not a "cool" enough place to be from. When people said they would love to visit, my reflex was always, "Why? There is nothing to do in Hong Kong." So, for years, I said London instead. And even though I have had my British address for almost a decade, the answer still feels like a small lie.

The longer I spend away, though, the more I miss things, and it is rarely things I would recommend to a visitor.

When I go home, I buy cheap fresh fruit from market stalls where the vendors still give you your change from a bucket. I walk across elevated walkways and get jujubes and candied ginger from the Chinese herb store. I visit my tiny nail salon in an otherwise unremarkable building, where my manicure costs a fraction of what I would pay abroad.

None of this seemed particularly interesting when I was growing up. I paid more attention to how dirty the streets were and how everyone seemed to know each other, which made the city feel smaller than I wanted it to. I wished our Starbucks had a trenta size and thought about how much I wanted to leave.

I also grew up hating Cantonese food. I refused to go to dim sum with my extended family and complained if we made anything steamed for dinner. Now, one of my favorite things to do at home is visit a cha chaan teng, a local cafe whose menu makes perfect sense to locals and possibly no one else. Breakfast might be macaroni in chicken soup with a slice of ham, or instant noodles topped with a fried egg and Spam. I abandon my lattes for a Hong Kong-style milk tea or a yuen yeung, black tea mixed with coffee for anyone unwilling to choose. My personal guilty pleasure is Hong Kong-style bolognese. Its relationship to Italy is distant, but the dish is delicious in its own way, and impossible to replicate.

"The longer I spend away, though, the more I miss things, and it is rarely things I would recommend to a visitor."

My childhood complaints about food had exceptions. After tutoring, my brother and I used to run to the corner bakery to buy a six-Hong-Kong-dollar pineapple bun (about 80 cents) from the older man behind the counter. It was a sweet reward for suffering through an hour and a half of Chinese lessons. We were such regulars that he sometimes slipped us hard candies for free.

That bakery is now a "Heytea," a Chinese bubble tea chain. Every time I go home, something I grew up with has closed, and something new has popped up in its place. Last Christmas, a "Luckin Coffee" replaced my favorite Shanghainese restaurant. The international frozen yogurt chain "Myka" also opened over the summer, with a line stretching down two blocks. The tailor my family went to for decades has been forced to retire because too many of his clients traveled to Shenzhen for cheaper services.

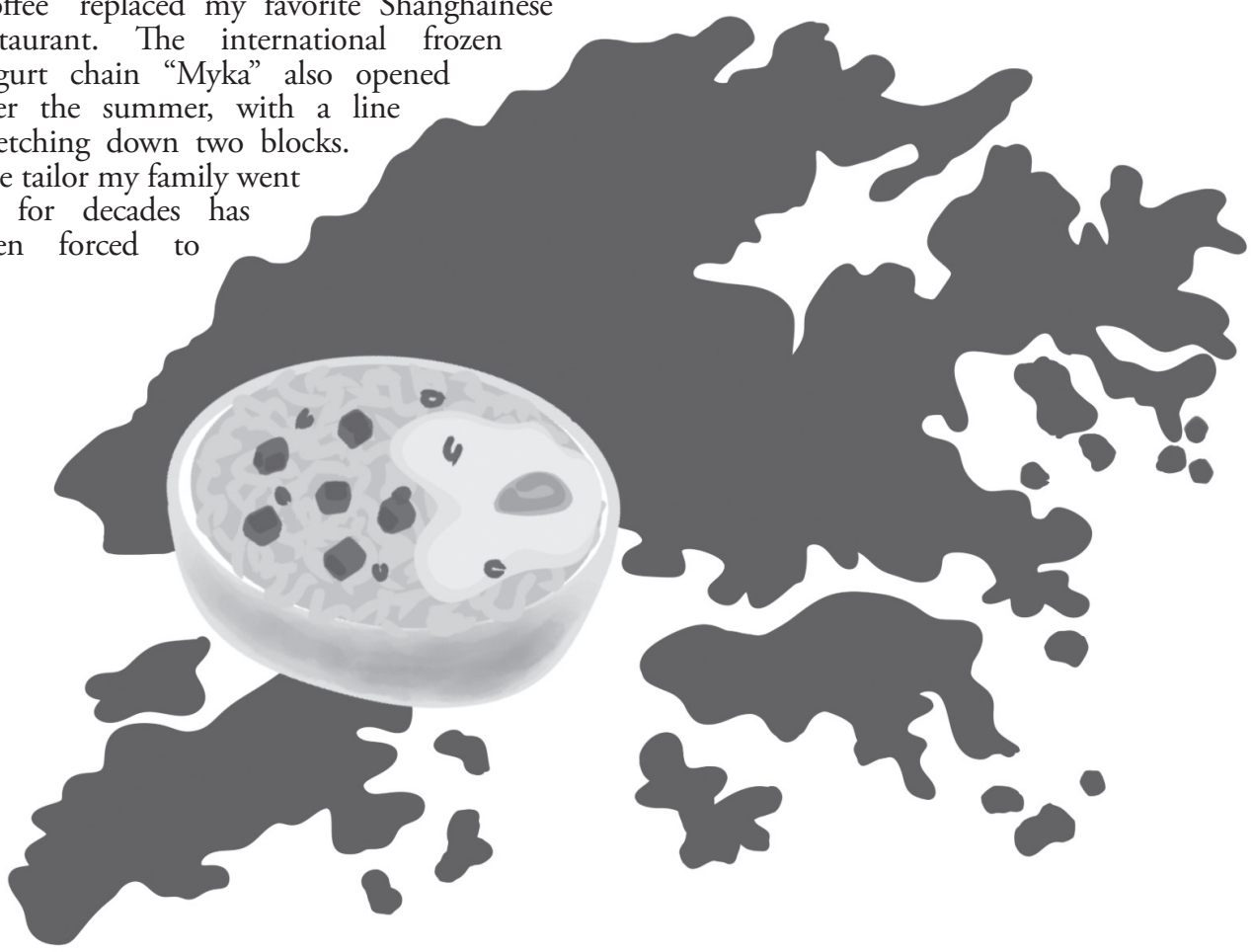
I am not above the new things. I like my triple supreme matcha from "Heytea," and I'm admittedly a victim of the froyo craze. But enjoying what is new does not stop me from missing what was there before. I spent years wanting to leave Hong Kong, and now that I look forward to going back, I am finding that some of the places I missed the most are gone. I did not appreciate them enough while I was there.

At the same time, growing up abroad has given me new ways to enjoy the city. I look forward to Art Basel, dressing up for dinners with my friends, and morning hikes with my family. Over the summer, I finally had my first (legal) drink in Lan Kwai Fong, even though the "7-Eleven" clerk didn't seem particularly concerned about the validity of my ID. Some familiar places have disappeared, but I'm just starting to get to know others.

Coming to Harvard means I am even further away from home, with fewer opportunities to go back. Cambridge is quieter, and I am enjoying that. But in October, the air is dry and crisp, and I catch myself missing my warm autumns and the damp, salty smell I used to complain about. Now, when someone asks where I'm from, I say Hong Kong, and when they say they would love to visit, I tell them to bring a jacket for the air conditioning.

Audrey Cheng '30 (audreycheng1@college.harvard.edu) would give anything for an egg tart.

Graphic by Sarahluna Sassine '29



SPORTS

Weekly Sports Preview: October 22-29

Your weekly what-to-watch in Harvard athletics.

By LUCY DUNCAN '28

As the second month of school wraps up, Harvard's fall sports are moving from packed schedules to morning lifts and the occasional matchup. For many fall sports, this is the last week of regular-season play before conference playoffs. Meanwhile, winter sports are finishing their preseasons and starting their first games. With parents and families on campus for Family Weekend, Crimson fans of all ages will have plenty to watch this week!

Men's Hockey

Men's hockey makes its home-ice debut this Friday. Their 4 p.m. exhibition match against Northeastern will be new head coach Rob Rassey's first opportunity to impress Crimson fans. Rassey, an assistant coach for the Crimson from 2013-2019, returned to Harvard this year after a four-year stint at the University of Michigan, where he helped lead the Wolverines to two Big Ten Tournament Championships and three Frozen Four appearances.

The Crimson will then play their first official match of the season next Thursday, Oct. 29, at 7 p.m. against the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Last year's two leading point scorers, forward Mick Thompson '28 and defender Matthew Morden '27, return, alongside an incoming first-year class that includes three NHL draft picks.

Women's Hockey (2–0–0)

After kicking off their season with back-to-back wins over Holy Cross this past week, the Crimson will face St. Michael's University at home at 7:30 p.m. on Friday. Harvard is the defending Women's Beanpot champion, while St. Michael's went 1–33 in their last season. This should be an easier game for the Crimson as they prepare for conference play.

On Saturday at 7 p.m., the Crimson will face the University of New Hampshire. UNH holds the overall series record, but the Crimson have won recent matchups. This is the last non-conference match of the semester and comes ahead of a stretch of Eastern College Athletic Conference games. Goaltender Ainsley Tuffy '28, who recorded a conference-best 0.950 save percentage last season, and last year's top scorer, Morgan McGathey '29, will be critical to Harvard's ongoing success. Lindsay Stepnowski '30 is a first-year standout, netting two goals in her first two games.

Men's Swimming and Diving

At 6:30 p.m. on Friday, men's swimming and diving will kick off their 2026-27 season with a scrimmage at M.I.T. ahead of conference play in November. Head coach Kevin Tyrrell returns for his 14th season leading the overall team, while Tracey Byrd enters her second season leading the divers. Two of last year's Ivy League champions return: Adriano Arioti '28 in the 200m backstroke and William Mulgrew '29 in the 1000m and 1650m freestyle events.

Field Hockey (12–1)

On Friday, field hockey heads to New York for a 5 p.m. match at Columbia, concluding their regular-season road games. Last year, Harvard beat Columbia 2–0 to win the Ivy League regular-season championship, so this game hinges on one critical factor: pride. Conference leader Harvard is favored to win, after coming out on top in the last twelve matchups between the two schools.

Then on Sunday at 12 p.m., the Crimson returns to Berylson Field for a non-conference match against Monmouth. In their penultimate regular-season game, this top-25 team will challenge Harvard ahead of the Ivy League Tournament. Goalkeeper Linde Burger '29, 10th in the nation in goals-against average, will be a key player in the net, while All-Americans Sage Piekarski '27 and Martha le Huray '28 lead the offense.

Football (5–0)

This Saturday at 3 p.m., football plays Princeton at Harvard Stadium in the annual Fall Fest homecoming game. The Crimson extended their perfect streak with last week's victory over Holy Cross. While the Tigers hold the all-time series record, the Crimson has won the last two meetings. Captain and running back Xaviah Bascon '27, supported by offensive linemen like All-Americans Spencer Doan '27 and Thomas O'Brien '27, has led Harvard to wins like its dominant scoring display against Cornell. Fans who attend Fall Fest can also enjoy a jersey giveaway, live music, and food trucks.

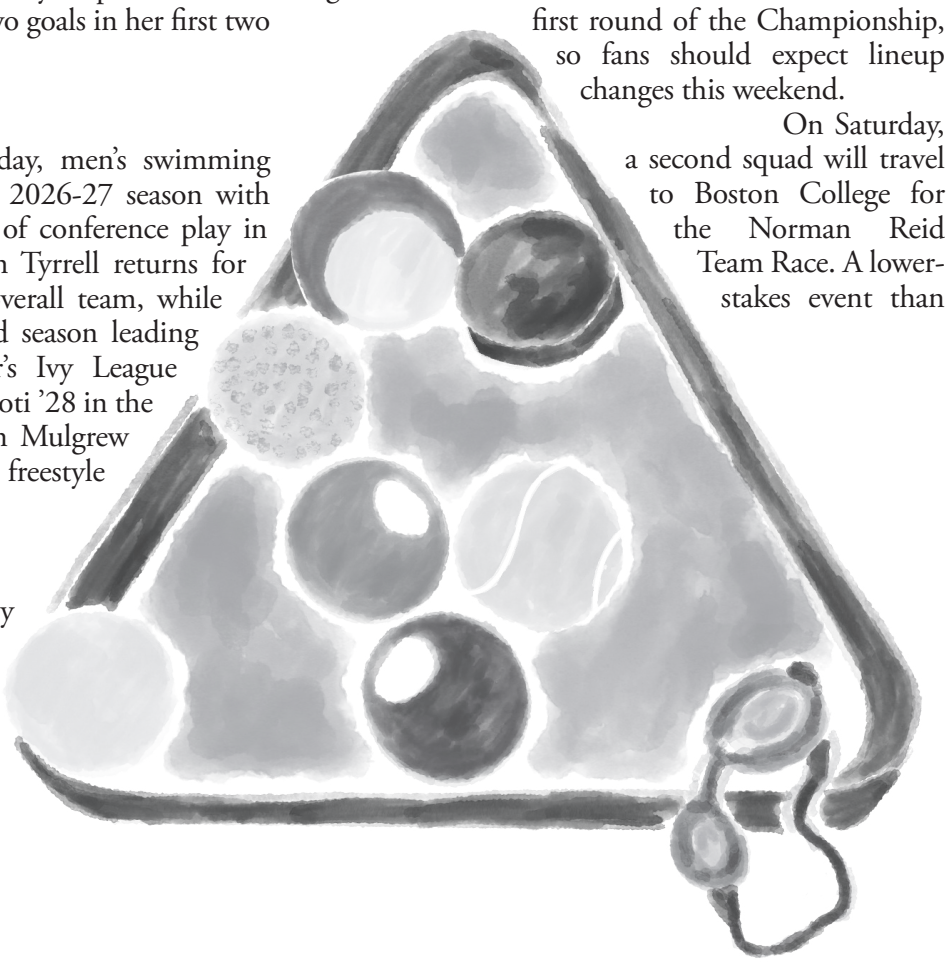
Women's Volleyball

After opening conference play with a five-set victory over Dartmouth, women's volleyball travels to Hanover, New Hampshire, on Saturday for their first rematch of the semester. Harvard has swept this matchup for the last three years, though last week's five-set win over Dartmouth shows the Big Green won't go down easily, as the Crimson strive for an Ivy Tournament bid. Their last victory relied on kills and blocks from key players like Ali Farquhar '27 and Sofia Rossi '29.

Sailing

This weekend, sailing splits their squad between two regattas. First, this weekend is the final round of the Open Atlantic Coast Championship, hosted at Brown University. The Crimson comes off last weekend's historic first-place finish at the Women's Atlantic Coast Championship, led by skipper Zoey Ziskind '27, and will look for another big win. Harvard finished seventh of 17 teams in the first round of the Championship, so fans should expect lineup changes this weekend.

On Saturday, a second squad will travel to Boston College for the Norman Reid Team Race. A lower-stakes event than the Atlantic Coast Championship, it will likely be more of a developmental opportunity for Harvard's strong first-year students.



Tennis

This weekend, both of Harvard's tennis squads will compete in the Ivy League Qualifier tournament to qualify for the Intercollegiate Tennis Association Conference Masters. The men's team will compete at Princeton and the women's team at Columbia. The Crimson squad is dominated by Stephanie Yakoff '27 and Kavya Karra '27, who took home the doubles championship title at last week's New England Regionals, and Rohan Murali '27, a semifinalist at the same event. All three have earned an automatic spot in the ITA National Fall Championships in November.

Women's Golf

This weekend brings the fall finale for Harvard women's golf: the Lady Blue Hen Invitational in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. This will be the Crimson's final event of the semester before returning in the spring, so much is on the line. This season, 2024-25 Ivy League Champion Vanessa Zhang '28 and rookie Rayee Feng '30 have been Harvard's top performers, so keep an eye on them heading into the weekend.

Men's Soccer

Men's soccer hosts the University of Pennsylvania this Saturday, with kickoff at 1 p.m. Sitting at No. 4 in the Ivy League with three conference games remaining, the Crimson need every victory to qualify for the Ivy League Tournament. UPenn has won the last three games in this series and ranks second in the conference, so careful, disciplined defense, led by goalkeeper Jason Broome '29, will be crucial to success.

Women's Soccer

On Friday at 7 p.m., women's soccer heads to Brown. Last year's draw against Brown and subsequent loss to Columbia cost the Crimson an Ivy Tournament bid, so that Harvard will be looking for revenge. Goalkeepers Olivia Busby '30 and Nicole Biden '29 will need to lock down the Crimson's net while captain Anna Rayhill '27 leads the offense.

If your parents are in town this weekend, bring them across the river to the Athletic Complex! Not a fan of the cold? Cozy up next to an ESPN stream and cheer on the Crimson's away games.

"If your parents are in town this weekend, bring them across the river to the Athletic Complex!"

LUCY DUNCAN '28 (LDUNCAN@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) WRITES SPORTS FOR THE "HARVARD INDEPENDENT."

GRAPHIC BY RILEY CULLINAN '27

Branching Out

Discussing whether U.S. professional sports should expand internationally.

By TYLER DANG '28

Cultural events take different forms worldwide, creating a shared bond that remains unique to each people. Coming-of-age celebrations have distinct names and customs across Jewish, Latin American, and Māori communities, but the core idea stays the same. Harvest festivals in the United States, Canada, and India vary in practice, but they celebrate similar themes. Sporting events join this pattern. They, too, take many forms but consistently give fans the same amusement and thrill of competition.

In the United States, sports like football and baseball have become staple "American pastimes," ingrained in national culture. To many, domestic holiday celebrations would feel incomplete without a big sports game screening. The Super Bowl itself is an unofficial national holiday, consistently dominating as the most-watched U.S. telecast. Sports have become central to American identity. As a result, the three largest American sports (football, baseball, and basketball) are expected to generate $49.1 billion in revenue this season, exceeding estimated worldwide live-music ticket revenue, global box office revenue, and the entire European fútbol market.

Although sports like baseball and basketball have popular leagues in other countries, major American leagues like the NBA, MLB, and NFL have begun expanding internationally, hosting games abroad to reach new markets. Some U.S. fans are less than excited about these changes, as international games often carry major negative implications for domestic supporters and the teams themselves.

This raises key questions. Should these American leagues expand internationally, even if it hurts domestic fans? Does it matter whether the intentions are purely monetary or aimed at growth and accessibility?

"Major American leagues like the NBA, MLB, and NFL have begun expanding internationally."

The Fan

What is the purpose of professional sports? While some see it as just entertainment, professional sports foster community engagement and bridge divides by offering common ground. Cities and states come together to support their local team, regardless of race, politics, or economic background. A 2026 Harvard Kennedy School study shows that sports reduce partisan animosity among fans. They connect despite their differences through a shared love of a team and the sport.

Fans, as drivers of the market and the community practice of sport, serve an important purpose. As leagues expand internationally, these domestic fans suffer. Supporters face logistical challenges, largely due to time zones. International broadcasts make it harder to watch favorite teams because games start earlier or air on different networks. The NFL has nine international games; two-thirds of them start at 9:30 a.m. ET. The Jacksonville Jaguars play in two of these morning games, including back-to-back contests in London. Instead of watching their team during the typical afternoon blocks, fans must wake up early to cheer them on. While these inconveniences may seem minor, they are still unfair. They demonstrate that international growth is prioritized over domestic fans.

Losing a home game also means losing the traditions and rituals that drive sports' communal aspect. Tailgates, game-day traditions, and the experience of a packed stadium are what turn a simple game into a community event. Moving games away from the communities they bring together thus undercuts the very purpose that makes them valuable.

The effects do not stop at the stands, however. Players and teams face their own challenges when the season takes them overseas.

"Tailgates, game-day traditions, and the experience of a packed stadium are what turn a simple game into a community event."

The Team

Just as fans benefit from sports, teams benefit from fans. Home-field advantage suggests that the home team, because of familiarity with the field or its fans' enthusiasm, has an edge over the away team. Studies of Italian fútbol during COVID-19 revealed that both fan presence and the home field itself contributed to an advantage over the away team. Furthermore, fan pressure led referees to rule more often in the home team's favor. Playing internationally removes this advantage.

International games often require more travel than the season typically demands. Crossing multiple time zones severely disrupts sleep patterns, recovery cycles, and routine preparation, forcing athletes to compete while their internal body clocks lag by hours. Studies show that jet lag reduces players' performance, especially when traveling eastward. At first glance, this seems fair when both teams have to travel. But what about the games afterward? If one team comes off a bye or has back-to-back home games, it has an unfair advantage because the opponent has to travel farther than usual. Because these international games are not evenly distributed across the league, some teams are simply at a disadvantage.

Moreover, increased travel negatively affects player recovery. In contact-heavy leagues like the NFL, which carry a high risk of injury, longer travel reduces recovery and makes players even more susceptible to injury in the next game. The same is true for MLB, which has 162 games over about six months, and the frequency of games puts significant physical pressure on players. Instead of squeezing extra money from foreign markets, leagues should prioritize player health.

"Instead of squeezing extra money from foreign markets, leagues should prioritize player health."

The World

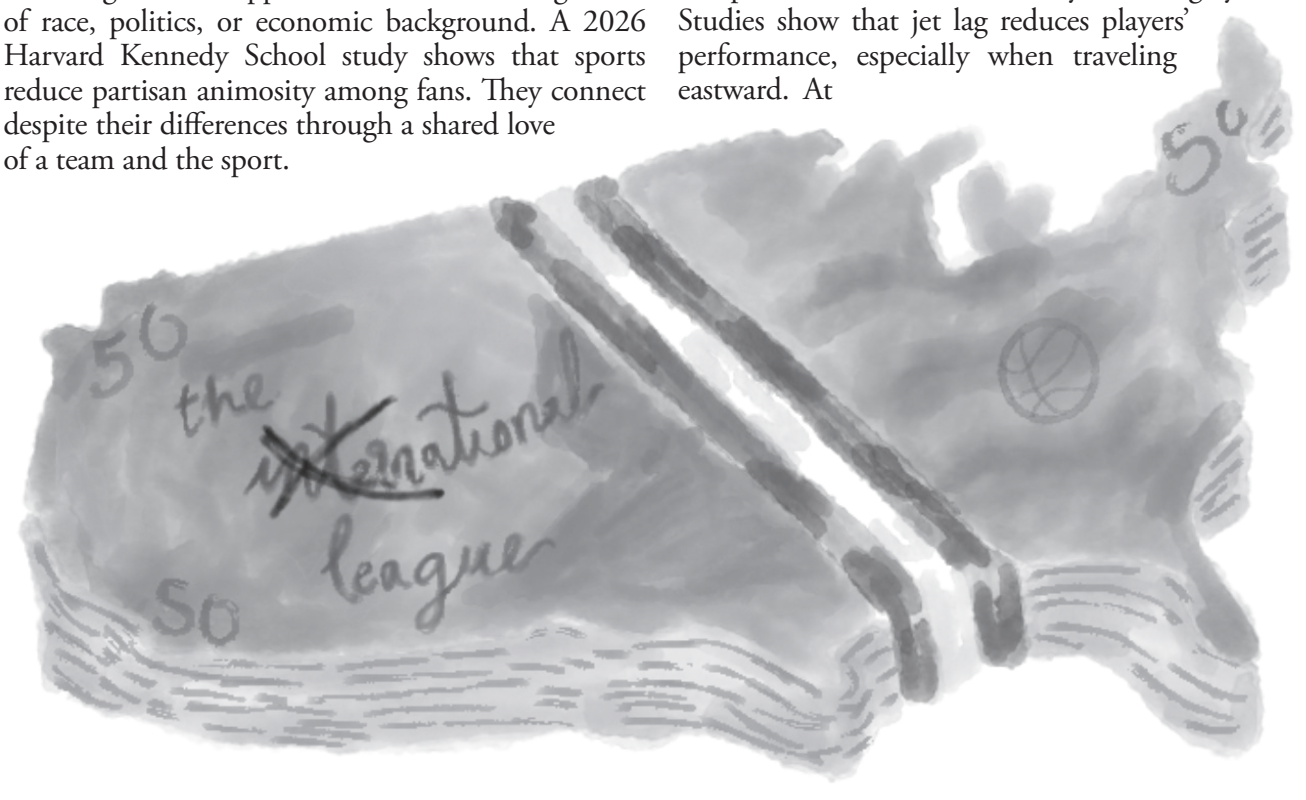
While these costs are real, leagues are not necessarily at fault for seeking international growth. The same logic that makes a home game so sacred is what makes sports worth sharing. If these athletics can bring communities together, why can they not bring people across borders together? Just as the coming-of-age celebrations and harvest festivals described earlier look different across cultures but serve the same purpose, sports can be adapted by new communities and made their own. A fan in London or Mexico City who attends a live game may become a lifelong supporter, bringing the same sense of belonging and shared identity that domestic fans already enjoy.

International games introduce sports to potential fans in a more meaningful way. Instead of only seeing unfamiliar international sports online, more people can actually engage in person. By entering new foreign markets, leagues unlock major revenue streams, generating capital that teams can reinvest in facility development, athlete salaries, and improved domestic fan engagement. So despite greater difficulty and inconvenience for domestic fans and potential challenges for the team, ultimately, international games can improve everyone's enjoyment.

The biggest concern is intent. Growth, even if financially motivated, can still help create a more connected sporting world. With deliberate, thoughtful scheduling and intentional decisions about where to hold international games, leagues can grow their fan base abroad without hindering the domestic market. The challenge is not whether to expand, but how to do so without forgetting the original fans who fundamentally uphold the sport.

Tyler Dang '28 (tylerdang@college.harvard.edu) is happy with the Titans' first win of the season—FTC.

Graphic by Sarahluna Sassine '29



Fan Fiction: A Field Guide to World Cup Super Fans

A deep dive into soccer's most loyal followers.

By SALMA GHEITH '30

After this past summer's World Cup, millions of viewers have evaluated which teams were the best, who had the most infectious energy, and who had the most fun on the pitch. But few took a serious look at the fans. A team's most fervent supporters can reveal a lot about their nation—and the crowds themselves.

Let us think about you and me—fierce soccer fans, of course. How many times has your country qualified for the World Cup? Messi or Ronaldo? Soccer or fútbol? What we support often reflects who we are, our nationality, and our patriotism. Maybe you pick something to be performative, or maybe you have been watching since you were five; either way, every team comes with a stereotype.

Forget the weird Reddit threads. At the "Harvard Independent," we skipped vague descriptions of each team's culture and fanbase and got straight to what fans in each country do during a game.

England

No matter the game, the stakes, or even the team, you can always count on fans of England's national soccer team to belt "It's Coming Home" with as much conviction as possible. Well, except for the fans there only for Jude Bellingham—they might know only "Hey Jude." England's fans are nothing if not passionate—so much so that they are no longer allowed to drink within the sight of the pitch. All of this abhorrent behavior happens while they munch on salt-and-vinegar "chips" packaged in a newspaper. Finally, we cannot forget "squeaky bum time," the tense, high-pressure closing stages of a game when the outcome remains dangerously uncertain. Let us just say the English are no strangers to squeaky bum time. Just ask any Arsenal fan in April.

Egypt

Mo Salah is a national institution for Egyptian fans. Everyone is personally invested in his hamstrings, his beard, and his Ballon d'Or snubs. Now every hero needs an arch-nemesis, and for Egypt fans, Sergio Ramos has been public enemy number one since 2018. Rest assured, they will never forget the time he injured Salah's shoulder right before the World Cup, and fans bring it up whenever Real Madrid or Ramos comes up. In Egypt, the cafe is the stadium; hundreds of plastic chairs line the streets as fans sip tea, puff shisha, and shout tactical instructions at the television (the coach can hear in spirit).

Colombia

Colombia has a lively, passionate fanbase; that said, they definitely have a reputation. No Colombian fan has ever been wrong, and every red or yellow card is highway robbery by the referee. You will definitely hear "el árbitro" if you listen closely when the cards come out. Penalty shots matter more than anything, and don't forget: you cannot cross your fingers or your legs; contrary to popular belief, it is bad luck! No matter what happens in any Colombia game, every fan will hold onto the fleeting excellence of the 2014 World Cup; it is the best run ever. Every year it is "este año sí" (this year yes), because each year gives Colombia fans a new chance to prove their loyalty is worth it.

Japan

Arguably the proudest team in the world, Japan is a tough act to follow because of its top-tier fans. As organized as their home nation, they arrive on time, cry in victory or defeat, and leave the stadium cleaner than they found it (sometimes with origami cranes), making every other team look bad by comparison. Packing blue garbage bags is just as essential as bringing the jersey. Though they are the underdogs, they are not to be underestimated; after major upsets in the 2022 World Cup, every Japan fan is quietly confident something big is coming.

Argentina

Messi is a saint; Maradona is a God. We mean that literally, and Argentina does too. For Argentina fans, soccer is a religion, and like every religion, it comes with its own rituals and superstitions. You can't show up to a game without a paper figurine of the enemy (Brazil's best players) frozen in your fridge; how else will you freeze their performance on the pitch? There will never be an Argentina game where "anulo mufa" is not shouted consistently; it translates to "cancel the jinx," because anything that could jeopardize the team's success must be warded off. Of course, it does not work when the danger is the players themselves.



Italy

Every Italian fan leads with passion and a little bit of drama. The best way to strike them down is to snap spaghetti in front of them, but there is no guarantee they will get back up (ask the Albanians). A true win for the Italians is a 1-0 success built on defense, but if you ask them, it is an art form. Every foul is a Shakespearean tragedy, and every fan is a tactical expert as soon as the clock starts counting down.

Morocco

People watch the games in the streets, not in the stands. Even if you think this is like Egypt, every Moroccan fan will insist you are wrong. Cafes are the place to be, but Moroccan fans know how to have fun even when they cannot get in—you will find people sitting atop their cars, praying they can hear the game's details outside. After every win, uncles and aunties of any age will charge into the water to celebrate another victory.

Norway

No fanbase is complete without Norway's Vikings. You will hear the stadium shout "Ro!" before every game, and it will make you wish you were rooting for them instead. The Big Friendly Giant is Erling Haaland, who some fans have said is "just running around undiagnosed," but they'd never want to see a Norway team without him. Fans are especially excited to see Norway in a World Cup; after all, it was slowly becoming a legend told by sweet grandmothers and sleepy grandfathers.

United States

No U.S. fan will ever budge on the word "soccer," even after learning that it actually comes from British slang. Americans are perfectly happy defending a British word if it means they get to reserve the word "football" for the sport with helmets. Game day looks a lot like any other American sporting event: tailgates, foam fingers, and trucks the size of a New York City studio. The only confusion comes when the clock counts up, and Katy Perry doesn't appear at halftime. Many fans are perplexed at the concept of a game ending in a tie. No need to worry; if all else fails, U.S. fans can always remind you that their women's team has four World Cup titles … four more than the men have ever won.

Regardless of which country you support during the World Cup, we hope soccer—sorry—fútbol fans felt represented in this piece. No worries if we missed your country this time around; the "Harvard Independent" will always be here to generate another list of satirical stereotypes that come along with your fanbase. See you in four years!

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