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Analysis of the News and Social Media Coverage of the British Royal Family: Recollections May Vary[1]

Abstract

The fascination with the British monarchy, which spans the globe, is particularly visible in the United States. Despite fighting a bloody war to separate themselves from Great Britain, Americans are still heavily obsessed with the British royal family. The interest endures in great part due to the air of mystery and celebrity depicted in media productions as well as real-life events that keep providing media fodder on both sides of the pond. Among the latest and most controversial royal family moments are those regarding Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. This study analyzes the treatment of the Sussexes in the mass media and on social networks by examining the Netflix productions *The Crown* and the *Harry & Meghan* docuseries, Meghan Markle's Spotify podcast, *Archetypes*, as well as the correlation between articles and interviews in both American and British media and the social media posts. Employing the uses and gratifications theory and

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[1] The three words, "recollections may vary" (Lang), are credited to Queen Elizabeth II in her attempt to defend the monarchy without directly accusing her grandson Prince Harry and his wife of lying after they made their severe allegations against the royal family during their infamous interview with Oprah. The phrase has since been used numerous times by the media to point out discrepancies between the truth and the couple's truth. It is worth mentioning that seventeen of the couple's allegations that triggered a media frenzy were proven to be false.

the theory of the negativity bias, it aims to demonstrate that the combination of the two approaches can be useful in explaining shifts in media coverage that catered to the needs of media users whose changing gratifications shaped media representations of the ex-royal pair. The analysis reveals how varying reactions pertaining to cultural differences reinforce preexisting attitudes regarding the British royal family in order to expose the gratifications and experiential factors accompanying the participation of individuals in news production and diffusion in large global virtual communities.

Keywords: News media, social media, the British royal family, the uses and gratifications theory, negativity bias

1. Introduction

The fascination with the British monarchy, which spans the globe, is particularly visible in the United States, which has a history with the monarchy in several ways. First, the British colonies in America fought a bloody war to separate themselves from the British monarchy and ensure for themselves life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Having gained their independence, however, the thirteen American colonies operated under the weak Articles of Confederation and a weak Continental Congress, so that even General George Washington described "the condition of public affairs [as] almost anarchic" (Krauel 48). To overturn the rule of the mob and strengthen the executive power, the newly independent colonies even considered establishing a constitutional monarchy. It sounds unbelievable that this could have been considered an option after seven years of war to throw off British rule. Just as strange is the name of the person who was considered for monarch, the namesake of a well-known "spare" of the British royal family, Prince Henry Charles Albert David, usually referred to as Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, who is not likely to ever be the "heir."[2] Rufus King reveals that in 1786, the President of the

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[2] The reference to the word "spare" is significant because Prince Harry's choice of his memoir's one-word title *Spare* comes from the phrase "the heir and the spare," which

Continental Congress, Nathaniel Gorham, "had written a letter to Prince Henry, brother of the great Frederic [Frederick the Great], desiring him to come to the U.S. to be their king and that the Prince [Frederick Henry Louis of Prussia] had declined" (qtd. in Krauel 46). The idea of having a constitutional monarch as the Head of State instead of an elected President is hard to grasp because the United States would have had to agree to be modeled on the very same English system that the colonies had fought a war to overthrow. Furthermore, it is worth noting that there is another source claiming that in 1786, Prince Henry was offered the candidacy for monarch of the United States, but the offer was quickly revoked before he declined it ("Prince Henry of Prussia"). Regardless of whether the offer was declined or revoked, we know for certain that the Continental Congress delegates found a new solution more in line with the core American ideals and values of a democratic government elected by the people. American Presidents achieve their position through elections and not through hereditary succession.[3] In contrast, in the United Kingdom, royal titles are conferred, bestowed, or inherited, which undermines the American belief that rank is earned.

The above-mentioned story about Prince Henry [Frederick Henry Louis of Prussia] and the possibility of the US becoming a constitutional monarchy is significant for this paper as it exemplifies the American public's perspective towards royalty since the founding of

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emphasizes the superior position of the first-born son as the heir and the inferior position of the second born as the spare. In his memoir, Prince Harry mentions disparagingly that his father used the phrase in reference to him as did the media and some members of the royal family.

[3] The United States Constitution states: "No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States: And no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State" (U.S. Const. art. I, sec. 9, cl. 8.1).

the country. On the one hand, Americans are fascinated by royalty, while, on the other, they prefer democratically electing their heads of state and have no regrets regarding their country's independence from Britain. This has been confirmed by the results of an *Economist/YouGov* poll according to which "three in five Americans say it would be bad for the U.S. to have a monarchy" (Frankovic and Sanders). However, although Americans do not want to be ruled by a royal family, according to a *Gallup* poll, "the highest-ranking members of that institution [are] more popular in the United States than the nation's own democratically elected and appointed leaders" (Saad).

Although in 1776 Americans rejected the governance of British royalty, many never lost their admiration for the royal pomp and pageantry. As Maria Tatar, a professor of folklore and mythology at Harvard University, explains, "The monarchy becomes a kind of Holy Grail for everyone because that is the ultimate in terms of wealth, power, glamor, charisma — all of those things which you don't have in that boring at-home situation" (qtd. in Hajela). Edward Owens, British royal commentator, historian, and author, comments that the relationship between royalty, the media, and the public is impacted by "new kinds of journalism and new media technologies [that] combine to shape how members [of] the royal family became celebrities" (15). Mass media outlets cater to the American audience's increasing fascination with news and gossip on the British royal family, and the media users are not only consuming the spilling of the royal tea but also actively, via social media, expressing their views, impacting the mass media production and creating and disseminating royal news content. Milestone royal events, like royal weddings, coronations, jubilees, official state events, celebrations, and funerals, attract and engage royal fans, as is also the case for some media productions that have been drawing huge audiences, such as Netflix's *The Crown*.

One of those milestones was the wedding of Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, and the American actress Meghan Markle, which was initially seen as a relief to both the royal family and the British public after a somewhat reckless lifestyle the younger sibling of the future king of England displayed. A series of events surrounding the reception of the American bride by the royal family, the move of the Sussexes to the US, and the shift from the image of victims of racial discrimination to their disclosure as failed business venturers, was largely covered by the mass media, either the traditional ones, such as newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio shows, or social networks. As the couple's informative role very frequently intersects with their commercial function, it is not surprising that the consumers dictate the choices of topics and the type of their coverage and that the number of clicks determines the value of a story.

Using the uses and gratifications theory and the theory of negative bias, this paper analyses traditional and digital media coverage of the British royal family. The paper intends to show how the varying of media content to meet the gratifications of media users in the UK and the US led to the rise and fall in the media of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. The analysis offers an overview of media content in the UK and the US that resulted in a shift from being among the most celebrated royal couples to the most criticized ones. The starting premise of this analysis is Katz et al.'s observation that "seeking reinforcement of one's attitudes and values may derive from a need for reassurance that one is right" (513). In the search for objectivity, factuality, and the truth in media coverage, this key tenet of the uses and gratification theory can shed light on the varying attitudes of British and American media towards the new royal couple from the beginning of their relationship to their exiting the royal family. The analysis focuses on the UK and US users' motivations and a comparison of the gratifications sought and gratifications obtained, in particular on

the ways in which gratifications of media users differ even when they are exposed to the same content. In other words, "[t]he needs are specific in nature to the individual and how the media satisfies the need is subjective. . . . The media is the same, but people use it for different needs" ("Communication Theory"). This is relevant for this research as it aims to expose a discrepancy in the gratifications obtained from similar media content by media users in the UK and the US. This paper argues that the shift away from positive media discourse surrounding Prince Harry and Meghan Markle was the result of them not being able to maintain the media users' support using their victimhood narrative. Following a string of narratives instigated by the audience's negativity bias that augmented the number of news that painted the Sussexes in a very negative light, the initial gratification needs of media users were shattered. Following a timeline of events concerning the activities of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, this paper attempts to determine key moments that exposed Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in the UK and US media and how the needs of the audience led to the flop of brand Sussex in the UK and the US. This paper also seeks to establish how the news and social media coverage of the British royal family, more specifically, the Sussexes, in the UK and the US shifted in news narratives, resulting in views variations due to cultural differences between the two countries as well as the gratifications of media users.

It is to be expected that cultural differences regarding the monarchy differ significantly in the two countries since one has a monarchy and the other one does not. The United Kingdom has a 1,000-year-old monarchy that has been shaped by centuries-old traditions and ceremonies, symbolizes unity and continuity in a rapidly changing world, and prides itself on duty and service. The United States does not have a centuries-old history and heritage; it is one of the most diverse countries in the world that celebrates multicultural customs and

traditions, and its residents are not subjects but citizens who strongly believe that no man is privileged by nature and that each of its citizens has equal freedom to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. These cultural differences have at times triggered different views among media users in the two countries, as will be discussed in addressing the discrepancy in the coverage and gratifications of particular news items.

2. The Impact of the Uses and Gratifications Theory and Negativity Bias on Mass Media Production and Consumption

The present research focuses on the impact of mass media on the audience not only as users but also as producers and shapers of media content and public opinion. The paper draws upon the uses and gratifications theory by Blumler and Katz (1974), which asserts that media users actively choose media to fulfill certain needs to reach the gratifications they seek. It also refers to the study of the impact of culture on the formation and gratification of human needs (see Ruggiero 27), in particular the postulate that "culturally situated social experience reinforces basic biological and psychological needs while simultaneously giving direction to their sources of gratification" (Lull 99).

According to Lull, the uses and gratification approach can enable our understanding of the origin of our needs and how they are gratified (qtd. in Ruggiero 27). In 1942, Cantril observed that the uses and gratifications theory was already in use in the early days of the communications research, in the study of the gratifications that captivate and maintain the attention of audiences to the types of media and media content that cater to their social and psychological needs (qtd. in Ruggiero 3). According to Ruggiero, "uses and gratifications has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium" (3). This is evident in the continuing relevance of the mentioned theory in the twenty-first century, in which technological and communication transformations have

led to major changes in the production and distribution of media content. Traditional mass media outlets (newspapers, magazines, radio, and television) and digital media (blogs, tweets, online publications, podcasts, and social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Yelp, Wikipedia, LinkedIn, Pinterest, MySpace, Snapchat, and WhatsApp) have converged to offer media users a plethora of options to interact with each other by generating and sharing content as well as to impact on the coverage of mass media outlets by making their needs known and providing the gratifications they are seeking. Focusing on communication scholars' research on the gratifications of media users, Moon et al. distinguish two types of gratifications: "gratifications sought" and "gratifications obtained" (109–10). In other words, media users turn to particular media sources with the intention to find satisfaction for their needs, and their satisfaction is the gratification (Moon et al. 110). According to Katz et al., "audience gratifications can be derived from at least three distinct sources: media content, exposure to the media per se, and the social context that typifies the situation of exposure to different media" (514). The impact of instant gratification provided by such exposure to media very frequently overshadows the necessity to acquire factually correct information, especially if the options of media users' interactions multiply exponentially. The varying reactions are also shaped by cultural differences that reinforce preexisting attitudes in order to reveal the factors related to the gratifications and experiences of individuals participating in the production and distribution of news in large global virtual communities. The uses and gratification theory has been selected for this analysis as it is user-oriented and focuses on mass media users that are motivated by their psychological and social needs to select particular media channels and content choices (Katz et al.); likewise, [media users] play an active part in mass media consumption and production by delivering and posting their own media con-

tent (qtd. in Gallion; Bumgarner). Katz et al. specify five basic assumptions of the uses and gratifications approach:

1. the audience is active and its media use is goal oriented;
2. the initiative in linking need gratification to a specific medium choice rests with the audience member;
3. the media compete with other resources for need satisfaction;
4. people have enough self-awareness of their media use, interests, and motives to be able to provide researchers with an accurate picture of that use;
5. value judgments of media content can only be assessed by the audience.

(qtd. in Kunczik and Zipfel 190)

The five abovementioned elements of the uses and gratification theory highlight the fact that this is a user-centered approach that focuses on active media users who know where to find the needed information, which media to choose to fulfill their needs, and how to share their experiences as active media users. According to Katz et al., the three basic tenets of the theory are that viewers are (1) "goal directed in their behavior," (2) "active media users," and (3) "aware of their needs and select the appropriate media to gratify their needs" (58). In addition, Katz et al. classify uses and gratifications into five categories with regard to five groups of human needs:

1. cognitive needs, including acquiring information, knowledge and understanding;
2. affective needs, including emotion, pleasure, feelings;
3. personal integrative needs, including credibility, stability, status;
4. social integrative needs, including interacting with family and friends; and
5. tension release needs, including escape and diversion.

(Tan qtd. in Tanta et al. 87)

The five mentioned categories exemplify the abundance of needs of media users as well as the main tenet of the uses and gratifications

theory that "media use is selective and motivated by rational self-awareness of the individual's own needs and an expectation that those needs will be satisfied by particular types of media and content" (Katz et al., qtd. in Ruggiero 18).

According to Rozin and Royzman, "[p]eople generally tend to be more attuned to negative faces, words, and social information, and both the autonomic and central nervous systems tend to have measurably higher levels of activation in response to negative than positive stimuli" (qtd. in Hibbing et al. 303). If we assume that media content caters to the motivations and gratifications of the media users, then the widespread presence of negative news content is to be expected. Negativity bias is the principle according to which "negative events are more salient, potent, dominant in combinations, and generally efficacious than positive events" (Rozin and Royzman 297, qtd. in Hibbing et al. 303; see also Baumeister et al. 2001). The reason behind the dominance of negative news content, based on the human tendency to respond more strongly to negative information and elements in their environment than to positive ones (see Soroka et al. 18888; Hibbing et al. 303), is relevant for news coverage because "[n]egativity biases affect news selection, and thus also news production, as well as citizens' attitudes about current affairs" (Soroka et al. 18888). In the same vein, Zhuo Jing-Schmidt explains the negativity bias as a "pervasive cognitive-affective pattern" that results in "an automatic tendency to pay significantly more attention to unpleasant than pleasant information," which means that negative events impact our behavior more than positive ones (418). Likewise, in their article "Consumer Demand for Cynical and Negative News Frames," Marc Trussler and Stuart Soroka discuss the media users' proclivity towards negative news content, and similar findings are presented in research by Roy F. Baumeister et al. (2001), Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman (2001), Claire E. Robertson et al. 2023, and Cacioppo et al. (1997). Similarly, Shelley E. Taylor

and Ito et al. also argue that "negative information more strongly influences people's evaluations than comparably extreme positive information" (887) as "[n]egative (adverse or threatening) events evoke strong and rapid physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social responses," which accounts for negativity bias in forming one's judgment and evaluating information (Shelley E. Taylor 67-70).

Employing the aforementioned uses and gratifications methodology, the present study explores the effects of media-induced negativity bias by shedding light on the shifts in mass media coverage of the Meghan and Harry story and the concomitant response of media users in the UK and the US. It is based on the premise that, "instead of depicting the media as severely circumscribed by audience expectations, the uses and gratifications approach highlights the audience as a source of challenge to producers to cater more richly to the multiplicity of requirements and roles that it has disclosed" (Katz et al. 521). In other words, media users are not a passive audience but active participants in the consumption and generation of media content. In line with this argument, this study seeks to determine the extent to which British and American "users approach the media with a variety of needs and predispositions" (Katz et al. 518) and explain the variations and discrepancies in the media coverage and public opinion in the two countries regarding the members of the British royal family.

3. The Rise and Fall of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, Duke and Duchess of Sussex, in the Media in the UK and the US

The initial UK media content about the young couple brought satisfaction to all those media users who were motivated by the gratification of the royal family's generosity in embracing the biracial actress bride of their beloved prince. The media painted an ideal picture of an open-hearted royal family and the British nation as very accepting of Prince Harry and Meghan's romance. The positive coverage gratified

the media users in the UK and the US who had high and very favorable expectations of the royal family and the British public embracing the American newcomer into the royal fold. Although Soroka et al. claim that "the average human is more physiologically activated by negative than by positive news stories," they do add that "[e]specially in a diversified media environment, news producers should not underestimate the audience for positive news content" ("Cross-national Evidence"). Confirmation that the news coverage targeted at positive news content was meeting the users' needs is evident in the article "Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, Duke and Duchess of Sussex," in the American lifestyle magazine *Town & Country*, in which Morgan Evans and Eileen Reslen document an abundance of media content produced in the US and the UK that provides Prince Harry and Meghan's relationship timeline, which reveals positive coverage disclosing the agreeable reactions of the royal family, the British public, and the British press. It is important to point out that the royal family went to great lengths to keep the media coverage positive, which is evident in the fact that, as soon as some negative media stories about Meghan Markle appeared, the palace approved the issuing of a statement by Prince Harry's spokesman condemning the media harassment of the prince's new girlfriend. Prince Harry expressed his revolt by describing the negative coverage as "[a] smear on the front page of a national newspaper; the racial undertones of comment pieces; and the outright sexism and racism of social media trolls and web article comments" (Erlanger). After the statement was issued, positive media accounts prevailed as the couple's engagement interview sparked a media frenzy and the UK as well as global audiences were satisfying their media needs through media content leading up to the royal wedding. According to Pat Robins, "a royal wedding, provides an ideal occasion for placing the Royal Family at the center of national life, linking the happiness and hopes of the individual and the family with that of the

nation" ("Media Representations"). Their wedding resulted in 100,000 (Whitty) spectators lining the London streets and 18 million Britons (Waterson), 29.2 million Americans (Grady), and a huge TV audience around the world gathered to watch the fairytale wedding of Queen Elizabeth's grandson Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, his biracial American television celebrity bride. The wedding was broadcasted by the major television networks such as CNN, ITV, and BBC in addition to Internet and radio coverage in over 180 countries (Misachi). An estimated twenty-eight million people in the UK (half of the population) and twenty-nine million in the US watched the Sussexes' wedding, which cost over £32 million. Furthermore, the 3.4 million tweets sent during the ceremony confirm the intense social media interest and engagement (Waterson). The approval ratings of the abovementioned media going through the roof reflect the significance of the historic moment of an American and one of the first mixed-race members being welcomed into the British royal family in a ceremony that included an African American preacher and a gospel choir (Grady). Meghan and Harry's wedding, "with its explicit connections to the black and African American communities . . . is living proof that a real princess doesn't have to be white" (Gaither qtd. in Vinopal). If we consider the extent of media coverage and the attention it garnered, it is evident that the royal wedding gratified all five of the basic categories of needs regarding uses and gratifications named by Katz et al. The belief that the monarchy is good for Britain was satisfied, and media headlines highly publicized the new hopes for the royal family's future by teaming up Prince Harry and Meghan Markle with Princess Katherine and Prince William as the fabulous four senior working royals (Martinez-Ramundo and Pavni Mittal).

Although the young couple became a trending sensation on mainstream and social media, the couple's subsequent media output revealed that, behind the scenes, they felt sidelined by the royal family

and discriminated against by the British media. After only two months in the role of senior working royals, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle began calling out the British press and insinuating the lack of support from the royal family. In their interview with Tom Bradby during their African tour in 2019, the couple shocked the world with accounts of their struggles. While Prince Harry focused on his mental health issues and a strained relationship with his brother, Meghan Markle emphasized the tabloid intrusion and a lack of support from the family she married into (Tominey). As the couple began their attacks on the royal family and the British media, the royal family closed up, and the media took control. To avoid direct confrontation and not draw additional public attention, the royal family's usual response to public attacks was in line with their mantra "never complain, never explain." Since the British media users' need for an ideal picture of the newlyweds was no longer satisfied, they were not gratified and thus sought media content painting a negative picture of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. The Sussexes' dissatisfaction with the British press accelerated on October 1, 2019, when Prince Harry released a statement commenting on the shift in the British press from praise to harassment and explained that he and his wife were taking legal action against *The Mail on Sunday* and its parent company, Associated Newspapers. In his statement, Prince Harry voiced his concerns over what he called "a ruthless campaign" by the British tabloid press against his wife during her pregnancy and after giving birth and explained that his "deepest fear is history repeating itself": "I've seen what happens when someone I love is commoditized to the point that they are no longer treated or seen as a real person. I lost my mother and now I watch my wife falling victim to the same powerful forces" ("Statement by His Royal Highness").[4] In Jan-

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[4] It is important to note that Prince Harry's anger at the British press, especially at the negative coverage of his wife, reminded him of the paparazzi that hounded his mother in France and, according to him, were to blame for the automobile crash that

uary 2020, several months after Prince Harry's statement, the fairytale illusion shattered. After effectively working just 72 days in their 22-month-long stint as Senior Royals, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex "released an explosive Instagram statement saying they were to 'step back' from their duties" (Elise Taylor) to create a new life for their young family in the USA, outside the constrictions of life within the royal bubble.

They wanted to become financially independent by earning their own income in the US but at the same time to continue to carry out royal duties. This was not an option for working royals, so they accepted to give up their senior roles in the British royal family along with the funding and the patronages and Prince Harry's official military appointments and embark on a journey termed as Megxit, a play on Brexit that refers to the British withdrawal from the European Union. With Queen Elizabeth's blessing and assurance that "Harry, Meghan and Archie will always be much loved members of [her] family" ("Statement from Her Majesty"), the couple decided to break away from royal life, give up the use of their HRH titles, and refrain from using their royal titles for financial gain. According to the agreement with the royal family, "While they can no longer formally represent the Queen, the Sussexes have made clear that everything they do will continue to uphold the values of Her Majesty" (Dymond). Media outlets reported both the disappointment of the royal family as well as the split views of the British public. As was the case with Brexit, while many Britons voiced their support for the couple to embark on their journey of independence, others viewed their departure as a great snub to the British royal family. According to the findings of a *YouGov* poll conducted on January 9, 2020, 45 percent of the British were in

caused her death. In many of his subsequent interviews, his memoir, the Netflix docuseries, and numerous court cases against the British press, Prince Harry returns to his childhood trauma, which has deeply affected his life.

support of Harry and Meghan's stepping back, 29 percent were neutral, and 29 percent were opposed ("Do You Support"). Thus, as the Sussexes exited, the initial expectations for a fairytale with a happy ending in the UK were shattered. The gratifications of the media users were not satisfied as the Duke and the Duchess of Sussex literally left the kingdom. Failing to meet the gratifications sought, the media users turned to negative media in the UK, which outweighed the positive.

To get away from negative press, the Sussexes moved to the US, which bought into their victimhood narrative and brought new hopes for new gratifications. Their breaking royal news sparked a global media frenzy that caused a divide in the media coverage in the UK and the US. Praise turned to scorn as the UK media outlets and social media platforms were expressing their disappointment and disapproval at Prince Harry's decision to abandon the Queen and country, with all his royal and military duties, in order to move to the US and carve out a new future for himself and his family (Perraudin). The negative UK news coverage is evident in an analysis that found that, out of 843 articles published in fourteen print newspapers since mid-May 2018, 43 percent were negative and only 20 percent were positive, whereas 36 percent remained neutral (Duncan and Bindman).

The previously discussed US fascination with the British royal family generated great excitement among American media users to satisfy the need for a fairy-tale image of the British royal family presence in the US. Americans applauded the independent streak of the couple and expressed a favorable view and high expectations for a brighter future for the couple in the US. According to a *YouGov* poll conducted on January 16, 2020, by more than four to one, Americans supported the couple's decision to carve out a better future for themselves and their son away from the Royal family. The poll also showed overwhelming support from Black Americans who were very approving of the couple's fleeing victimization and racism and finding their

safe haven in the US. It is interesting that, despite the show of support regardless of race or politics, the poll also revealed a great lack of sympathy for the couple along with the opinion that they should finance themselves independently and not receive benefits from the British government (Frankovic). Cultural differences came into play as the polled American citizens underscored the basic American values of individual freedom and self-reliance, making clear that they were supportive of those looking to achieve their American Dream but only through hard work and not privilege and entitlement. Also, although they supported Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's walking away from the Royal Family, Americans were still fond of the Royal family, found Queen Elizabeth to be the most popular member, and considered William, the heir to the throne, as popular as Harry. The US still held on to the fairy tale image of the British royal family until Prince Harry and Meghan put their victimhood on full display in the Oprah interview, their *Harry & Meghan* Netflix docuseries, Prince Harry's memoir, *Spare*, Prince Harry's interviews to promote his memoir, their *Archetypes* podcast, and a series of other media appearances focused on the victimization by the British press and the British royal family. The American need for a fairy tale image of the British family was being destroyed as media content focused not on their glamor and celebrity but on their scandalous treatment of the Sussexes and colluding with the British tabloids.

Americans were welcoming to the royal couple as the latter told their truth of disparagement by the British press and the royal family, who, according to their claims, were in cahoots together and destroying the couple's mental health. While the Sussexes' leaving the UK went against the British belief that a royal does not abandon the monarchy, in the US, which fought a war to abandon the monarchy, the departure of the couple was in line with the American belief in freedom and independence. This example illustrates the varying British

and American preexisting attitudes and confirms the postulate of the uses and gratifications theory that the same or similar media content can be viewed differently in diverse cultural contexts, once again confirming late Queen Elizabeth II's comment that recollections may vary. As introduced previously, cultural differences are based on personal integrative needs and social integrative needs, which, according to Katz et al., is the principal tenet of the uses and gratification approach. The Duke and Duchess of Sussex were aware of the different interpretations of their story, and they took every media opportunity offered to them in the US to tell their own truth and their own story. In his *Late Show* interview with James Corden, Prince Harry explained that he had not given up on living a life of public service but that he had stepped back from royal duties and life in the UK and relocated to the US because of the toxicity of the British press that had been endangering his mental health and creating a threatening environment for his young family (Crawford-Smith, "Prince Harry's Surprise Visit").

The victim-friendly initial mass media coverage in the US empowered the Sussexes to carve out a better future free from the constraints of the royal family. As long as the American public and the mass media highlighted the injustices the Sussexes suffered in the UK, the couple were not concerned with Americans questioning their victimhood claims and the negativity they targeted at their families and Harry's homeland. Initially, the US mass media drew support for the Sussexes as underdogs fleeing racism in the UK and taking refuge in the US. Media stories of their victimhood led to numerous opportunities for the Sussexes to share their truth with the American public that is especially sensitive to racial victimization and was eager to discover the shocking behind the scenes revelations. In *Rolling Stone* magazine, Staples explains that "[a]fter fleeing to the U.S. to start a new life in the wake of a racist and misogynistic smear campaign in the British

press—which they accuse the royal institution and their family members of actively colluding in—the pair signed a string of lucrative deals with the biggest streaming platforms" ("Meghan Markle and Prince Harry"). Although the couple claimed that they wanted to get away from the intrusive tabloid press and toxic social media, in order to finance the lavish lifestyle they were used to, they turned to major media outlets to earn their living. On their road to financial independence, they have attempted several business ventures. In 2021, Meghan Markle's bestselling children's picture book, *The Bench*, was released, for which she is reported to have received an advance of up to $618,000 (500,000 British pounds) (Porterfield and Ponciano). Thereafter followed their first significant undertaking, the explosive tell-all interview with Oprah Winfrey entitled *Oprah with Meghan and Harry*, which was broadcast on CBS and ITV in 2021. The couple garnered much sympathy in America through this interview, which portrayed them as victims of a racist royal family, the British public, and especially the British press, which caused them emotional trauma and threatened their personal safety. The interview included a discussion of the couple's relationship, wedding, their children, estrangement from both families, racial trauma, safety concerns, and financial worries that resulted in severe mental health struggles of the couple and their decision to move to the US. Among the so-called "bombshell allegations" were claims that Meghan was dealing with suicidal thoughts and being refused help by the palace, that she was falsely accused of offending Princess Catherine, and that Prince Harry had been cut off financially by his father. However, the severest allegation was that the royal family was potentially racist because their son, Archie, the only mixed-race great-grandchild of the monarch, was going to be refused a title, and thereby security, and that even concerns had been made questioning the potential implications for the royal family if their child's skin was too dark. By failing to expose the per-

son or persons who made the derogatory comment, the Sussexes caused a media frenzy as speculations were raised about the identity of the royal racist or racists who voiced these concerns.[5] It is evident that the Sussexes were aware of the damage this particular allegation would have because, the morning after the interview, Oprah told "CBS This Morning" that Harry wanted Oprah to make known that neither his grandmother nor grandfather were involved in the conversation about the baby's skin color (Lewis). Nevertheless, to Queen sympathizers it must have been disheartening to consider she died the following year knowing that their family reputation was besmirched by the accusation that there was a racist in the royal family. After a legacy of devoting her 70-year reign to the Commonwealth and the work of the royal family with patronages and scholarships offered to thousands of people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, this would likely have been a devastating and hurtful accusation to bear. Because of the family motto of "never complain, never explain," which was particularly practiced by the Queen, the family refrained from addressing the accusations publicly. However, the day after the interview was broadcast, Buckingham palace released the following statement on behalf of Queen Elizabeth II:

> "The whole family is saddened to learn the full extent of how challenging the last few years have been for Harry and Meghan," the release read. "The issues raised, particularly that of race, are concerning. Whilst some recollections may vary, they are taken

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[5] It is also important to note that, during the interview, there was a discrepancy because Meghan said that when she was pregnant with their son, Archie, there were several conversations with Harry during which racial concerns were expressed, but when Harry joined the interview, he said that at the beginning stage of their romance, there was a conversation in which mention was made about what the color of a future child might be. The discrepancy could have been recognized as a red flag that something regarding this claim was off. This discrepancy led to further questioning of the allegations and, after fact checking was done, seventeen of the couple's allegations were proven to be false and induced media users to fact check other allegations made by the Sussexes.

> very seriously and will be addressed by the family privately. Harry, Meghan, and Archie will always be much loved family members." (Lang)[6]

In contrast to remaining silent, Prince Willliam defended his family against racist allegations, saying: "We are very much not a racist family" (Davies). Regardless of the royal family's counternarrative, media users followed their negativity bias and championed the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, even presenting them with the Ripple of Hope human rights award by the Robert F. Kennedy foundation for their "heroic" stand against "structural racism" in the monarchy (Beal).

After the Oprah interview, "[i]n September 2020, the Duke and Duchess signed a multiyear, $100 million contract with Netflix to produce documentaries, docuseries, feature films, scripted shows and children's programming" (DiSalvo). To date only three productions have been realized. Following the framing of negativity bias and victimhood, in December 2022, the couple released their six-part *Harry & Meghan* Netflix's documentary series, in which they continued their victimhood narrative, whereby they garnered sympathy from the media users who gratified their feelings of solidarity with the couple's struggles and the negative role of the British royal family. The docuseries covered their relationship from the very beginning to Megxit, Prince Harry's memories of his mother's tragic death, Meghan's mom's recollections of racial discrimination, the events that led to the estrangement from her father and half-brother and sister, the intrusion of the press into their lives, and the awkwardness of meeting and interacting with the seemingly unwelcoming royal family. The

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[6] The timing of the interview was unfortunate as Prince Philip was very ill, in hospital, and passed away just one month later. Although seventeen of the allegations proved to be false, they were damaging and very likely contributed to the failing health of the aging Queen, who was coping with her husband's worsening health and soon thereafter losing her husband after 73 years of marriage during the time the whole world was dealing with COVID lockdowns and other restrictions.

docuseries made no mention of racism in the royal family, but Meghan claimed that the Royal firm endeavored to disparage her, and she gave a detailed account of the emotional anguish she and her husband suffered as a result of the mistreatment by the British media and the royal family.

It is worth mentioning that the Netflix's *Harry & Meghan* documentary series was one of the most successful Netflix documentaries, while their other two Netflix projects by 2003 did not do as well (Crawford-Smith, "Prince Harry's Netflix Show"). According to the ratings, it leads to speculation that media users preferred negative media content that satisfied their needs for behind-the-scenes royal scandal and gossip. Neither the *Live to Lead* series, highlighting the contributions of notable global figures, released in December 2022, nor the five-part documentary tribute to extraordinary veterans, *Heart of Invictus*, released in August 2023, were popular enough with viewers to make the Netflix Top 10 charts (Crawford-Smith, "Prince Harry's Netflix Show"). The fact that only their *Harry & Meghan* documentary series attracted viewers confirms that media users select content that gratifies their needs and that their choice of content tends to give more weight to negative than positive content. Both of these assertions worked well for the Sussexes' strategy to present their victimhood narrative within a negative frame. However, their strategy backfired as media users delved deeper and deeper into negative content and uncovered negative information that put the couple in a negative light. If their media strategy had emphasized their positive accomplishments as much as their victimhood, the public would have had a more balanced view of them. However, the Sussexes' strategy of sticking to their victimhood narrative, together with the media users' proclivity for negative news content, resulted in American viewers being less attracted to news within the affirmative frame. This was confirmed once again with the couple's podcasting venture, which failed.

The couple signed a twenty million Spotify deal with their Archewell production company in December 2020 that intended to deliver inspirational podcasts "that build community through shared experience, narratives, and values" (Noven). They produced a 33-minute holiday special in December and, two years later, in August 2022, Meghan's podcast, *Archetypes*, ran one season with twelve episodes. The podcast had some success and received the 2022 People's choice award but was cancelled, and the whole Spotify deal was cut short because of a lack of produced content during the three-year period (Noven). It became obvious that the podcast content did not meet the listeners' needs. It is noticeable that the *Live to Lead* series, the *Heart of Invictus* documentary, and the projects by the couple that did not deliver bombshell attacks on the royals did not gratify the media users as the projects that satisfied the audience's need for gossip behind the scenes, which, once again, demonstrated the "negativity biases in human cognition and behavior" (Soroka et al. 1) and the tendency of media users to focus mainly on negative news.

After the interview and the *Harry & Meghan* docuseries, Prince Harry's highly anticipated autobiography, *Spare*, followed, generating headlines, once again unsettling his royal family. Just like the *Harry & Meghan* docuseries, this tell-all book became a #1 *New York Times* bestseller, confirming one more time that the media users' need for royal scandal and gossip was being satisfied. His memoir revealed his truth about his life events that led to new disclosures regarding the rift between the Sussexes and the royal family, the trauma caused by the tragic death of Prince Harry's mother, Diana, the mistreatment of Meghan by the British press, and his extensive drug and alcohol use because of his failing mental health. Prince Harry's fury regarding the British media implicated his brother as he expressed his belief that William had been directly involved in "the 'dirty game' of negative briefings to members of the media by royal communications teams

extended to Prince William's office" (Razzall). Also, he shed a negative light on his brother's wife, Princess Catherine, and his father King Charles III's Queen Consort, Camilla. The only allegation he did not make against the royal family was the racism claim expressed in the Oprah interview. Furthermore, the inflammatory allegations made in the memoir were also disclosed in sit-down interviews to promote the book with journalist and ITV News presenter Tom Bradby, *The Late Show* host Stephen Colbert, ABC co-anchor Michael Strahan at *Good Morning America*, Anderson Cooper on *60 Minutes*, and renowned speaker and bestselling author Gabor Maté, MD. According to McFarland, "Fame is the only currency the Duke of Sussex truly has; his truth and reputation are the main products he has to trade. . . . Harry needs the American media to be on his side to get the American people on his side" ("Prince Harry's Special Relationship"). Americans tend to support the underdog, which Prince Harry represented as the spare to his brother, Prince William, the heir. The support was initially strong, but "[w]hile, at first, it seemed the couple's potent mix of psychobabble and British-bashing had found a readymade audience in the US, the more Americans [had] learned about the Sussexes, the more they [had] taken against them," and many former allies of the Sussexes were turning on them (Slater).

Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's aspirations to go from working senior royals to Hollywood celebrities backfired in terms of garnering public support. As their materialistic side was revealed, they quickly went from victims to villains, destroying the gratifications of their supporters. By focusing on monetizing their victimhood by making scathing comments about the British press and Prince Harry's family, the Sussexes kept the media focus on negative news content. This worked well as long as they fed the media users' needs to see them as victims and the media painted the picture according to the audience's needs. However, as media users discovered negative con-

tent that put the Sussexes in a bad light, their gratifications were no longer satisfied. There was a shift to a negative perspective of the couple, and they sought content to gratify their changing attitudes. The public, struggling to make ends meet during times of a cost-of-living crisis, had less and less understanding and empathy for the constant whining of the privileged couple living in their $14.5 million mansion in Montecito. As media users discovered that many of the so-called bombshell allegations made by the Sussexes were proven to be false, the victimhood narrative was no longer satisfactory, and they were looking to satisfy their needs by selecting content that exposed and ridiculed the Sussexes in the most negative ways. The US and the UK media outlets, especially social media, gratified the users' needs by providing the sought content.

Prince Harry's questioning of America's Bill of Rights, which protects the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press, was heavily criticized on the Internet in both the US and UK media. Prince Harry caused a media frenzy on Twitter when he called the First Amendment "bonkers" (Kirkpatrick). This angered many Americans and provoked the following tweet by Meghan McCain: "We fought a war in 1776 so we don't have to care what you say or think. That being said, you have chosen to seek refuge from your homeland here and thrive because all of what our country has to offer and one of the biggest things is the 1st amendment—show some utter respect" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick). Nigel Farage, British broadcaster, former politician, and Brexit leader, tweeted: "For Prince Harry to condemn the USA's First Amendment shows he has lost the plot. Soon he will not be wanted on either side of the pond" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick). Farage's comment foreshadowed the negativity bias by mainstream and social media outlets and platforms in the US and the UK directed at the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, who, within four years, have gone from extreme praise to intense backlash on both sides of the Atlantic. Addi-

tionally, in the *Daily Mail*, British broadcaster, writer, and journalist Piers Morgan claimed that Prince Harry "hates anything which affords any protection to journalists to say things he doesn't like" and called him an "indignant media-loathing Prince" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick). Morgan's criticism brings to mind that, since 2019, the couple has filed a number of lawsuits against UK and US media outlets as well as the fact that, at present, Harry is "involved in four cases against U.K. tabloid newspapers" (Ott). Although the Sussexes claimed to serve others, not much was to be found in the press about them that could compare to the daily accounts of charity work—the media's counternarrative about the royal family. Even the American media consumers and the American press in their counternarrative were voicing criticism aimed at the Duke and Duchess, whom the media represented as continuing to emphasize their victimhood despite living a privileged life. They were also constructed in the media as hypocrites for their frequent private jet travel while preaching about the responsibility to reduce our carbon footprint and reminding us that our behavior affects the environment. Consequently, these conflicting narratives of the couple led to a loss of credibility. Criticizing the royal family was no longer acceptable despite everything Prince Harry had gone through in grieving his mother's tragic death. Just 24 hours after his book, *Spare*, was published, the couple were requested to vacate their residence at Frogmore Cottage by furious King Charles III. The British media were eager to report Frogxit, the couple's being evicted from their Frogmore Cottage. After the media storm over the book *Spare*, the perception of Brand Sussex was beginning to plummet, and this was obvious as they were mocked by *Southpark* in an episode called "The Worldwide Privacy Tour" (Crawford-Smith, "How Prince Harry"). The episode caused a sea change and opened the floodgates for open criticism of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. Up to that point people were wary of criticizing the Sussexes, fearing to be pro-

claimed as racists, misogynists, or White supremacists. After the *Southpark* episode, the Sussexes faced heavy public backlash, especially by entertainers. Even the *Rolling Stone* magazine reported that the couple's brand was in crisis and that they were entering their flop era (Staples). Conservative commentators and media personalities in the US, like their counterparts in the UK, have come after Meghan using the same tropes. On her podcast, Megyn Kelly called Meghan "whiny, woke, and annoying" (qtd. in Blanchet). Similarly, after Prince Harry and Meghan Markle lost their multi-million-dollar Spotify deal because of their unproductivity, Bill Simmons, a Spotify executive, also accused the couple of being privileged whiners as he labelled them "effing grifters" and criticized their monetization of their royal status by saying: "You live in fucking Montecito and you just sell documentaries and podcasts and nobody cares what you have to say about anything unless you talk about the royal family and you just complain about them" (qtd. in Flam). Comedian Chris Rock ridiculed Meghan's claims of victimhood and mistreatment by the royal family and lampooned the couple in his new Netflix stand-up special, "Selective Outrage," by alluding to Meghan's claim during the Oprah interview that the royals were racist for having expressed concerns over how dark their child would be. "Sometimes it's just some in-law s---," Rock said on the special of Meghan. "Because she's complaining, I'm like, 'What the f--- is she talking about? 'They're so racist, they wanted to know how brown the baby was going to be. . . .' I'm like, 'That's not racist,' cause' even Black people want to know how brown the baby gon' be. S---. We check behind them ears." The couple have also been ridiculed by the cartoon *Family Guy* for receiving millions from Netflix for no one knows what (Petit). Katie Nicholl, a royal expert, author, and *Vanity Fair*'s correspondent, has revealed that sources close to the royal family are of the opinion that Prince Harry's book, *Spare*, and his interviews are heading him in a path of destruction ("Why Insiders").

His book gave ammunition to the media when he disclosed his Taliban kill count, which could have put himself, his whole family, and fellow soldiers in danger. His oversharing about his brother's private parts revealed his lack of discretion, to say the least, and references to his own as he called it "todger" led to him being savagely mocked by show host Jimmy Kimmel with a parody on his book entitled *The Prince and the Penis* (Crawford-Smith, "How Prince Harry"). In addition, his detailed descriptions of his past drug use put in question the validity of his being granted a Visa to reside in the US. The illicit drug consumption caused concerns and prompted presenter Kirstie Allsopp to criticize Prince Harry, tweeting: "If you have a vast platform, you don't mouth off about using illegal drugs, the trade which kills people" (Duffin). Prince Harry was also criticized for lamenting about the intrusion into his privacy by the British press, while at the same time intruding on the privacy of the members of the royal family to ridicule them.

The above examples illustrate the ridicule and scrutiny faced by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex as the negativity bias, which initially worked in their favor but eventually destroyed their reputation. The Sussexes were eager to generate negative media content that focused on their victimhood, but they did not expect that the tendency to search for negative news content would result in exposing their mistruths and undermining their credibility. The negative bias frame of their victimhood narrative was challenged by a counternarrative, disputing the Sussexes' statements, and, as the above examples show, the American media and public turned against the couple, who were described in the counternarrative as going against the core American values, such as loyalty to one's country and family. As media shattered the users' gratifications regarding the couple, they turned to negative coverage of Harry and Meghan to satisfy their audience's needs. Thus, the media users' perspective of the Sussexes shifted as the varying

views became their source of gratification, and Prince Harry and Meghan became objects of scandal and gossip. In line with the Jing-Schmidt's uses and gratification theory of cognitive-affective patterns, Jaworski offers a psychological explanation of how the Sussexes' narrative of victimhood led not only to their initial empowerment and favor but also to their consequential downfall in the US, claiming that people have a "proclivity for paying attention to negative rather than positive information" as "negative events and experiences get quickly stored in memory, in contrast to positive events and experiences" ("The Negativity Bias").[7] Jaworsky's assertion is observable in the sympathy the Sussexes garnered as American audiences were drawn to the compelling media headlines focusing on the injustices the Sussexes suffered at the hands of British media and the Royal family. However, the shift in the audience empathy occurred as headline negativity turned to the Sussexes' extensive use of private jets, their public disrespect towards their families, exploitation of royal titles for private financial gain, and charity scandals. They failed to realize that the initial negativity bias frame directed at the royal family would garner short-term success in their favor until the media and their consumers would be so consumed with the negativity bias that they would look for it in all the actions, which included those carried out by the Sussexes themselves.

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[7] It could also be argued that some of the pervasive cognitive-affective patterns, which put a stamp on a collective memory of the British, were the historical traumas caused by the role of American Bride, Wallis Simpson, in the abdication of Edward VIII, or the failed marriage of Lady Diana and the then Prince Charles, which followed after a spectacular wedding, one of the most memorable events of the twentieth century, as people's expectations and the harsh reality of the events that follow fairytale-like stories offer a framework for the clash between the positive and negative outcomes of events covered by the media. Very frequently, such conflicting situations are a haphazard combination of affective and social elements that streamline the narratives in a specific direction.

As discussed previously, while the Sussexes have been free to speak out in the media, the royal family tends to keep to their nearly 1,000-year-old tradition of silence and the "never complain, never explain" adage. However, in recent years, the royal family's counternarrative has been expressed through royal PR statements debunking more serious rumors. Thus, media users seeking gratifications in support of the royals turned to the media outlets that generated the counternarrative that debunked the couple's misinformation and disinformation spread to gain public support and sympathy. As a result, Prince Harry has come under heavy criticism for monetizing victimhood, trauma, and basically exploiting his mother's death. In both the UK and the US, media users have leapt upon all the inflammatory material of the Sussexes trashing the monarchy while trading on their royal titles (Royston). While some media users have demanded that the couple stop using their royal titles of Duke and Duchess of Sussex, others have insisted that their titles be stripped. Even Bob Seely, the Conservative MP for the Isle of Wight, has called out the Duke and Duchess for their disrespect of the institution that has given them their titles ("Isn't It time"). Instead of the promised life of service, Prince Harry has been accused of selling his soul by what the media represented as vile attacks on family, country, and especially the British press, which in his narrative Prince Harry makes accountable for all that has gone wrong since his mother was hounded to her death by the paparazzi in France. Going into sensational topics in his narrative opened him up to criticism that he had been previously shielded from through the media's initial narrative about his victimhood. The Sussexes' ultimate drastic fall in popularity in the UK and the US, paralleled by the media gratification of the users' propensity for negative content by directing their attention to the discrepancies between the Sussexes' representations of their "truth" and the representations of their "alternative truth" by the royal family, corroborates the uses and

gratification position that media users are active participants in the consumption and generation of media content. At the same time, as this analysis has attempted to show, media users' fluctuating response to the Harry and Meghan saga also validates Katz et al.'s claim that the users' need for instant gratification frequently obscures their ability to acquire correct information and determine what the "real" truth is while being exposed to the competing narratives and counternarratives created by the media.

4. Conclusion

Using the uses and gratifications theory as an analytic lens, the present paper aimed to explain the correlation between the negativity bias and the shift from positive to negative media coverage of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, which led to the turning of the tide against the royal couple. The Sussexes' path from Hollywood royalty and high celebrity status to a fall from grace in the US is closely linked to their business model and their media branding, which was based on the negative bias frame of their narrative that monetized their victimhood and their truth. By using the victimhood narrative to justify their exit from the royal family and their flight to freedom to the US, the Sussexes kept the media users' attention focused on negative news content trying to retain this highly clickbaitable narrative. However, this strategy backfired as media users were exposed to an abundance of negative media content, which revealed a counternarrative disputing the Sussexes' claims of victimhood and ruined the couple's credibility. Thus, as positive needs of media users were not gratified, they turned to the negative coverage, which gratified their needs by reassuring them that their changing views regarding the couple were correct. Media users, who shape their narrative according to their needs and preconceived narrative frames, selected and, at times even dictated, the media content by switching sympathy towards Prince Harry and

Meghan Markle to animosity because of the negativity bias and failed needs. The findings of this analysis highlight the relevance of combining the uses and gratification theory with the theory of negative bias in interpreting the complexity of media content consumption and media-audience interaction.

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