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# Families, Relationships and Societies

## Is My Best Friend Toxic? A textual analysis of online advice on difficult relationships

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## **Is My Best Friend Toxic? A textual analysis of online advice on difficult relationships**

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In this paper we analyse the ways in which mediated discourses of toxic friendships echo and re-construct the category of the toxic friend. We ask: What kind of assumptions does the toxic friendship discourse draw upon, and what forms of subjectivity and interpersonal relationships are encouraged? Employing a critical discourse analysis of digital texts, we argue that the discursive category of the toxic friend draws upon a simplistic set of classificatory dichotomies distinguishing between the good and the toxic friend. We also suggest that the popular labelling of difficult friendships as toxic, reflects the contemporary diffusion of the notion of toxicity in contemporary public culture. Our contention is that this discourse reflects the discursive conflation between therapeutic culture and neoliberal wellness logic, with the figure of the toxic friend constructed in ways which support imperatives for self-care and self-governance. While much of the advice situates friendship as an important personal tie, there is very little encouragement to ‘work’ on these relationships. As such, these discourses offer a reductive, disposable approach to friendship ties that overlooks the complexities and lived experiences of friendship relations.

Key words: friendship; wellness; toxic; therapeutic culture; digital media

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### **Introduction**

Friendship is having a cultural moment. A recent spate of popular TV shows such as *Insecure*, *And Just Like That*, and *Stranger Things* explore and celebrate the relationship, along with bestselling novels and memoirs such as Anna Hope’s *Expectation* (2019), and *Everything I Know About Love* by Dolly Alderton (2018) that locate friendship at the centre of personal life. Yet, along with the prevalence of friendship narratives presented in popular culture, the figure of the ‘toxic’ friend has emerged, with a plethora of personal advisors and self-defined wellbeing ‘experts’ offering clear-cut scripts for identifying and ending a toxic friendship. These guides warn of the stark emotional consequences of being in a toxic friendship, with the ‘victim’ of a toxic friend drained and stressed out by the relationship. Indeed, the popularity of these texts raises some intriguing questions: How does the image of the toxic friend appear in digital media? What kind of assumptions does the toxic friendship discourse draw upon, and what forms of subjectivity and interpersonal relations are encouraged? Drawing on a textual analysis of 150 digital texts, this article addresses these questions by examining the circulation of toxic friendship as a discursive category which we attribute to be part of the growing media interest in toxic relations along with prevalence of wellness and happiness industry imbricated in neoliberal self-managerial discourses.

We suggest that the labelling of certain friendships as toxic fits with the diffusion of the notion of toxicity in public culture. For Roopika Risam (2015: np) ‘Toxic has become a cultural code word for the irritants and pollutants that disrupt our lived experience’. Indeed, it seems that the use of ‘toxic’ as an adjective is now ubiquitous

in both scholarly and public discussion ranging from 'toxic masculinity' 'toxic relationships' and even 'toxic academia'. Toxic masculinity for example, offers a simple diagnosis for masculine violence, with the 'toxic' elements of masculinity, distinct from the 'good' parts (Salter, 2019), which overlooks the cultural contexts and material realities that sustain gendered violence. Some commentators have claimed that the concept of toxicity has entered the therapeutic public vocabulary from the environmentalist movement (Buell, 1998; Risam 2015) and it could be claimed that the advice warning of toxic relationships often rely on this imagery and offer sweeping sets of recommendations for detoxification.

From this departure point, this paper attends to the effects that the discursive alliance between neoliberalism and therapeutic culture (Lahad, 2015; Salmenniemi et.al 2019) have on the contemporary discourse of toxic friendships. In so doing, we examine the toxic friendship discourse as another example of the psychological turn within neoliberalism (Gill and Orgad, 2018), representing the kind of subjectivity and social relationships that therapeutic culture and neoliberalism ideas encourage. For instance, ending a toxic friendship is often promoted as a courageous and healthy action, and accordingly viewed as a desired form of 'self-care', a tone which we align with therapeutic and neo-liberal modes of thinking and the kind of subject positions and emotional requirements they afford (Rimke, 2000).

While there is a plethora of literature on the ways in which these modes of meaning making have infiltrated family and couple relations and couple culture (e.g Lahad, 2015; Cloud, 1998; Elden; 2011; Illouz, 2012) very little analysis has examined the effects it has on friendships, and difficult friendships in particular. An exception is Eramian and Mallory's (2020) study which analyzes how the therapeutic discourse is used as a cultural resource to understand unclear endings of friendships. Their study, based on interviews with participants who experienced difficult friendships found that friends draw upon the therapeutic discourse as a potent cultural resource to interpret friendship troubles, yet that this approach often fails and compounds people's suffering.

Extending Eramian and Mallory's work published in this journal, we suggest that the toxic friendship formula offers a popular discursive resource through which difficult friendship can be explored. While Eramian and Mallory have examined how friends engage with therapeutic culture, in this paper we turn to what is presented as 'expert' advice on difficult friendships. While we do acknowledge these texts as potentially resourceful sites for support and guidance, here we focus on the regulatory ways in which these discourses portray difficult friendships and in turn desired modes of selfhood. By unpacking the various features of these discourses, we contend that these texts echo ideal friendship scripts, which appear to be largely based on expectations of free choice, care (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Allan, 2008; Budgeon 2006; Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Heaphy and Davies 2011), mutuality and reciprocity (Brownlie; 2014; Pahl and Spencer 2006), with a built-in flexibility other close relationships are not expected to share (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Allan, 2008).

We argue that while the texts may address the difficulties and challenges involved in friendships, the approach promoted in many of the texts is overly simplistic, reflecting Hochschild's observation that the self-help genre reflects a 'cultural cooling' (1994: 2) that emphasizes the primacy of the individual's needs and fails to acknowledge the complexity of human relations. The complexity of friendships defies the facile

classifications proposed by the toxic friendship formula, which reflect the imperatives of self-management and positive thinking. Friendships, as various studies have shown, are embedded in wider social networks, power relations and ethical commitments (e.g Bell and Coleman, 1999; Smart et al, 2012) and thus cannot be regarded as an autonomous dyadic tie which can simply be dissolved or disposed of.

## **Therapeutic Cultures**

As noted above, the past few decades has seen an emergence of literature exploring the convergence of neoliberal and therapeutic *raison d'être* (See for example, Cloud 1998; Salmenniemi, 2017; Salmenniemi et. al 2019; Rose 1990; 1998). Adopting a Foucauldian governmental approach, various works have examined the ways in which therapeutic texts provide various techniques in which one is expected work on the self in order to achieve a healthy and prosperous life ( Hazleden, 2003, Rimke, 2000). For Rimke (2000) self-help books promote the idea that forming a deeper commitment to one's personal will offers the path to liberation and self-realization.

Similarly, Rebecca Hazleden (2003) argues that self-help promotes the idea of easily governed citizens that are able to take care of themselves. Within this context, the self-reflexive citizen must understand his/her ultimate responsibility for their own happiness or unhappiness while detaching themselves from the unhappiness of others (Hazleden, 2003: 425). More recently, scholars have illustrated how wellness and happiness industries have become part of the neoliberal project and the pursuit of these as a moral imperative. (See for example, Ahmed 2010; Cedarström & Spicer, 2015; Lahad, 2020). Indeed, the proliferation of these messages has created a discourse in which consumers and employees are nudged into taking full responsibility for their health and well-being.

However, in recent years a vast body of literature has engaged with a more nuanced interpretation of therapeutic ideas (Swan 2007). This line of inquiry underscores the lived and dynamic experiences of therapeutic practices, attending to its varied production, reception and circulation in public culture. Scholars like Swan (2019) Salmenniemi *et al* (2019) and Kolehmainen (2019) illuminate the limitations of the neoliberal governmental approach which overemphasises the regulatory aspects of therapeutic cultures. As Kolehmainen asserts, such approaches 'do not acknowledge the lived, networked, relational and embodied experiences that therapeutics are about' (Ibid, 54). For example, in a study on the therapeutic practises in the workplace, Salmenniemi *et al* claim that the therapeutic 'opens up a horizon of hope by creating a space to voice the hidden injuries of neoliberal capitalism and envisage alternative ways of being in and connecting with the world' (2019: 157). In a similar vein, Swan writes that the therapeutic practices can be radical and may even form a political critique (ibid).

While this study explores the regulative aspects of these written texts, it is important to bear in mind that a reception-oriented study which would explore the experiences of readers may reveal that they do not necessarily concur with advice presented in the texts. From this perspective one could underline the multiplicity of the therapeutic cultures and attend to its varied interpretations. As Swan notes (2008: 90) categories and subject positions interact with lived subjectivity in a variety of ways. A similar

claim can be made in relation to the reception of the toxic friend category which may be used as a significant reference point in future friendship studies.

### **Difficult Friendship**

Our study furthers discussions on therapeutic culture by aligning this scholarship with recent conceptualizations of friendship. This alignment enables us to explore everyday friendship troubles in the context of therapeutic and self-governmental logic. Scholarship on friendship, with particular reference to western middle-class friendship, has tended to view the relationship as an elective, voluntary tie, generally involving trust, emotional equality and reciprocity (Roseneil, 2004; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Pahl and Spencer 2006; Cronin 2014; Eramian and Mallory 2020). However, and as various scholars have shown, this stance has somewhat glossed over the ambivalences and difficulties that characterise friendship, and meaningful intimate relationships generally, yet has dominated popular representations of friendship ties (Bell & Coleman 1999; Smart et. al; Heaphy and Davies, 2012; Eramian and Mallory 2020).

In this paper we converse with the new theoretical framework of critical friendships. which suggests that idealised accounts of friendship are partial and fail to consider the diversity and multidimensionality of friendships, their ambivalences and disappointments (Rawlins 1992; Davies and Heaphy, 2011; Smart et al, 2012; Heaphy and Davies, 2012; Davies, 2019; Eramian and Mallory, 2020). For Rawlins (1992) idealized images of friendship cause a dialectical tension between expectations of friendship and lived experience of friendship. An example of this is Aeby and van Hooff's (2019) study which explores the disappointment expressed by internet forum users who did not experience the close drawing in of friends they expected following an intimate relationship breakdown. Interestingly, users had often neglected friendships while coupled, yet expected friends to provide intense emotional support through their relationship breakdown.

The analysis of toxic friendships also brings up the emotional dimensions of friendship ties. For example, often friendship takes on exceptional emotional intensity during difficult phases of life (Roseneil, 2004; Rebughini, 2011; Aeby and van Hooff, 2019) when friends are expected to be 'there to pick up the pieces' (Roseneil, 2004: 413). This is when the emotional depth of a friendship is tested, and frequently found wanting (Aeby and van Hooff, 2019). During these 'existential trials', friendship provides a space for an account of the emotions a person has experienced, articulating them through language and introducing a new element of reflexivity based on friend's ability to relate and listen (Rebughini, 2011: 3.5).

Another important dimension of friendship is its institutional openness and informality (Eramian and Mallory, 2020). For Eramian and Mallory (2020) this means that friends are not bound by cultural scripts to 'work on' their relationships as opposed to the cultural expectation to work and fix romantic relations. Flemke (2001) has also stated that women's friendship ties are marginalised in therapy and therapeutic research, and although friends are regarded as having an important role in our lives the depth and importance of friendships is not usually addressed. In this way, normative relationship hierarchies undermine the emotional significance of friendship in women's lives. In a related context, Ann Cronin (2015) notes that there is often tension between couple relationships and the demands of friendships. She argues that

the couple unit is the central pivot around which most people organize their lives and value other relationships, with intimacy framed as a finite resource to be distributed using a principle of scarcity. Martinussen's study on midlife friendships in New Zealand revealed that 'friendships occupy a position as outside other, 'integral' components of life' (2019: 13).

These lines of inquiry, lay out the hierarchy of intimate relations (Budgeon, 2006; Martinussen, 2019) in which the sexual couple is assumed to take precedence, with friends regarded as necessary but supplementary to the 'primary parts of life' (Martinussen, 2019). This position of friendships might provide a partial explanation to why in many of the texts we have analysed friendships is regarded as easily 'disposable' when they do not provide support and mutual reciprocity. Before moving on to our findings we outline our methodology and data selection.

### **Data collection and analysis**

As the 'toxic friendship' category prevails in digital culture, a critical discourse analysis of a sample of 150 digital 'texts', in the form of online articles, was deemed the most appropriate method to understand and decode this phenomenon. In this manner, insight into friendship norms can be gained from the analysis of such texts, which contribute to broader narratives about 'the 'goods' and 'shoulds' of relationships' (Davies and Heaphy, 2011:6). These texts are representative of the contemporary proliferation of self-help material, the emergence of which Hochschild (1994) noted in the 1990s, as reflecting the ascendancy of an individualised, rationalised intimacy.

Our sampling model was based on a multi-layered approach, as to include a wide variety of relevant texts. Approximately twenty searches for the texts were conducted using the Google search engine, between July 2017 and December 2020, using the terms 'toxic friendship' and 'toxic friend', which revealed a large response. For example, a search for 'toxic friend' on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2019 revealed 540,000 results. Research was conducted from the UK and Israel, with both authors participating equally in the analysis of the texts, and both reviewing the other's selected sample and analysis. In selecting relevant results for analysis, non-text results were eliminated, leaving a large sample of online articles addressing various aspects of toxic friendship, the top fifteen results of which were included in each search (excluding articles which had previously been analysed). Our final sample was comprised of 150 texts relevant to our search criteria. The majority of texts did not list a publication date and many did not credit an author. They were published on online digital media websites such as *Refinery29*, *Buzzfeed*, *Huffington Post*, although some results were on the webpage of print magazines such as *Women's Health* and *Cosmopolitan*, and may also have featured in print editions. The format of the texts was either a short-form article, quiz or list, and the subject was advice in warning of the dangers of, or identifying, a toxic friend. That the term 'toxic friend' was largely limited to such texts suggests the role that digital media has played in echoing and amplifying this phenomenon.

Our focus on digital content reflects the emergence of the internet as a significant source of guidance on social and emotional norms (Holmes, 2011). The decline of print media since the emergence of the internet era in the early 2000s has been accompanied by a rise in online only digital publishers, which are representative of



the texts analysed here. The relationship between technology and media has seen journalism emerge as a precarious profession (Beckett and Deuze, 2016), as online content has become informed by a revenue-per-click business strategy in the shift towards mobile engagement (Helmond, 2015). In this context, digital content is designed for users to engage in by ‘reading, watching, viewing, listening, checking, snacking, monitoring, scanning, searching, clicking, linking, sharing, liking, recommending, commenting and voting’ (Meijer and Kormelink, 2015: 667). Further, most of the collected texts do not refer to more specific identifying factors as age, class, gender or race. It is, however, apparent that the texts are targeted at a female millennial audience, with articles often accompanied by images of a twenty or thirty-something white woman.

Critical discourse analysis was selected as a highly suitable method of analysis, and it is used here to reveal something about the specificity of digital texts, and the way that these texts arise from and speak to social experiences (Phillipov, 2013). Generally, this method aims to shed light on the linguistic-discursive dimension of social and cultural phenomena (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002), and we were able to use this approach to identify core themes and ideologies. This qualitative approach rejects a neutral, objective stance in research, and understands discourse is an integral component of social processes, which have ideological effects in that they produce and maintain unequal power relations between groups of people (Mullet, 2018; Fairclough, 2003; Lazar, 2007; Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999). We use this approach to explore the ongoing production of the ‘toxic friend’ discourse, and our analysis aims to understand the production of the subject formation of the toxic friend, and also to uncover some of its underlying premises. We find McGregor’s (2010), approach as highly relevant for our analysis here. For McGregor, critical discourse analysis attempts to explore the relationship between three levels of analysis; the text, the discursive practices, and the larger social context. We consider the digital platforms as compelling sites for understanding how dominant cultural constructions of friendship are represented and produced.

Our analysis began by critically evaluating the relevance of the sources, reading and rereading the texts in the context of our research questions. At this point, texts were coded in order to identify patterns or themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using this method, the coding of the texts included an initial open coding to sort the data and organise findings. More detailed theoretical coding was then carried out to determine the relations between various concepts, such as toxic friendships as a discursive category, happiness versus toxicity, characteristics of the toxic friend, and toxic friendship as excessive, to develop an analysis beyond mere content description. The extracts presented as findings are the result of this coding of the data.

The user interface for all texts analysed were public, and texts were freely available for public viewing. Nevertheless, the use of online data occupies an ‘ethical grey area’ (Whitehead, 2007). Conducting Internet research involves an ethical decision-making process grounded in the specific context of the study, and unlike personal blogs or forums, the published digital texts are written without the expectation of privacy (Elgesem, 2002). We consider all the texts analysed to be public, as they are all published and hosted by digital media publishers. Sites that are considered ‘public’ and do not require informed consent include opinion pieces, online news pieces, and

texts (Farvid and Braun, 2013) such as those analysed here, that are written for a public audience.

### **Toxic friendships as a discursive category**

The contemporary media discourse of toxic friendships draws and reproduces potent labels and sets of classifications: toxic friendships and the toxic friend. For example, Florence Isaacs, a US based 'friendship expert' who identifies toxic friendship as follows: 'Toxic friends stress you out, use you, are unreliable, are overly demanding, and don't give anything back'. (Hatfield, 2006). According this logic, one of the messages emerging from the data analysis is that a toxic friend is distinct from a 'good' one, in various ways, with toxic used in place of terms including 'demanding', 'difficult', 'unhappy'. The ubiquity of 'toxic' as a code word for irritants (Risam, 2015), or as a catch-all term for anything negative or problematic (Salter, 2019) is reflected in the messages of the texts analysed here.

A study of the article titles reveals that they are often articulated as friendship evaluation quizzes: '7 Signs You Have A Toxic Friendship', '10 Differences Between Good Friends and Toxic Friends', or 'Toxic Relationship: Don't ignore these 40 warnings signs'. In their analysis of online self-help texts, Gill and Orgad (2018) note that the content is frequently short and exhorts advice to readers on areas of their intimate lives, often in the form of lists. This format also prevails in the toxic friendship discourse through numeral lists and guidelines urging the reader to identify if their friendship is a toxic one. The use of metrics also conveys an accumulated effect which leads the reader to an conclusive truths and clear evidence based on numerical measurements: your friend is a toxic friend.

This accumulated effect is often emphasized in texts exhorting the reader to take the right course of action towards self-care. For example, in an article published on *Huffington Post* the writer provides '23 Warning Signs of a Toxic Friend' the writers stress the repetitive and accumulated effects that toxicity has on the vulnerable friend:

It's happening again. Your friend is pushing you hard until you hit a record low with stress. You feel powerless and even a little embarrassed. Staying with toxic friends influences you more than you think...Here are 23 signs to help you identify toxic friends. (Davis, 2016)

Similarly, an article published on *Women's Health* suggests that various incidents in a friendship may in fact be part of a repetitive pattern of toxic behaviour:

Friends are allowed to make mistakes—at least, that's what you thought when your BFF forgot your birthday. But then she flaked on you again last week. She lied to you last month. And she's just plain disappointed you so many times recently that you've lost count. If you're starting to feel like your "bestie" is no longer the best thing for you, chances are you're in a toxic friendship. (Women's Health, 2019)

Under the umbrella term toxic, a plethora of characteristics are grouped together, the toxic friend is jealous, bossy, unsympathetic, self-absorbed, and negative. In another text ‘Yikes! 10 Warning Signs That You’re in a Toxic Friendship (And You Need To End It ASAP)’, the toxic friend is described as someone who ‘takes over conversations with all her problems and you listen like the good friend you are. But when it’s your turn, she doesn’t listen to your stories or even respond back to your messages’ (Stephaniem, 2018). Indeed, toxic friends are regularly described as self-absorbed, and taking little interest in the reader’s life. The dramatic tone of many of these texts amplify the risk and dangers this friendship can have on the potential readers, leaving them as vulnerable and defenceless, unless they take action. To some extent these messages echo Furedi’s (2004) observation that therapeutic culture is in danger of making us all victims.

Thus, toxic friendships defy the ideal, in which friendship is based on reciprocity, care and support. These accounts support Smart *et al*’s (2012) important reflection that friendships can be experienced as damaging and unsettling, leaving the individuals involved emotionally scarred. What is striking about these discursive accounts is the rigid formula they present, which rests upon binary assumptions differentiating between the toxic and the non-toxic friend, a good friendship versus a bad one.

These messages also appear in the following *Bustle* article:

Few things are more difficult than realizing that you're caught up in a toxic friendship — the kind of friendship that has a negative effect on your happiness and mental well-being. Occasionally, there will be a glaring and concrete epiphany that will help you realize that your friendship is unhealthy — like, say, if your friend hooks up with your significant other. But since life isn't a TV show, it's far more likely that the signs that your friendship is damaging will be subtle and ongoing. However, you may eventually come to a point where you realize that a friend's behaviour consistently leaves you feeling disrespected, frustrated, or bad about yourself — and that you have to make a serious change. (Flynn, 2015)

Toxic friendships are thus regarded as a significant cause for ongoing distress, in which the reader (in this case the ‘good’ friend) is the victim of the offender (the toxic friend). A key trope in these discussions is the preoccupation of the suffering self (Illouz, 2008) and thus thinking about difficult friendships may potentially lead to a discussion on both the explicit and hidden injuries of friendship ties. Yet the way in which these injuries are presented are oversimplified.

The use of therapeutic vocabulary demonstrates how everyday experiences of friendships can be redefined through the therapeutic gaze (Furedi, 2004). Giving a definition to this emotional suffering is grounded in the popular therapeutic modes of thinking and calls for self-management and self-improvement. With parallels to work on the alliance of the therapeutic language and instrumental reasoning (Nolan, 1998), the experts provide specific guidelines of liberating oneself from their toxic relations when it no longer delivers the positive rewards commonly associated with friendship ties. To a certain extent the advisors’ position stands in tandem with the pure relationship paradigm (Giddens, 1992) which assumes people are free to choose their

relationships according to their own needs and preferences. However, and as more nuanced approaches to friendship relations demonstrate (eg Eramian and Mallory, 2020; Heapy and Davies 2012; Smart *et al*, 2012) such an approach cannot account for the complexities of friendship relations in everyday life.

### **Toxic friendship as a threat to happiness**

It appears that one of key elements of a toxic friendship is its impingement on the happiness and general wellbeing of the reader. We suggest that this emphasis relates to the entanglements of positive thinking and therapeutic culture so pervasive in wellness culture (See for example, Cedarström & Spicer, 2015; Lahad, 2020). As a range of scholarly works have shown (Ahmed, 2010; Ehrenreich, 2009, 2010) within the culture of positive thinking there is no space for negativity, anger and frustrations. The projection of unhappiness and misery onto particular identities has been outlined by Sara Ahmed (2010a), along with the imperative to convert bad feelings into good ones in order to maintain 'the promise of happiness' (*ibid.*, 44). An interesting correlative in this regard is Ehrenreich's (2009, 2010) claim of the retreat from everyday human drama to a culture of cheerfulness and optimism.

A recurrent theme in these texts is the claim that the toxic friend's unhappiness and negativity poses a serious threat to the reader's wellbeing. It should be noted that the tone of these texts often decontextualizes the toxic friend's negativity from any wider social context. See for example, the following extract, quoting life coach Sarah Argenal, exclaims:

It's vital to be supportive for those loved ones who are hurting and struggling. But being there for a friend who's having a hard time is very different from allowing a negative friend to envelop you into their world of negativity. "Negativity can come in all kinds of forms...Manipulation, a 'Debbie Downer,' or even being a classic 'one-upper,'" all have negative influences on your friendship. (Walley, 2016)

Argenal warns of allowing the toxic friend to 'envelop you into their world of negativity', which may come in many forms, including being a 'Debbie Downer' who articulates painful or depressing truths or a 'one-upper', who constantly claims to outdo the reader in their achievements and accomplishments. A piece published on the *Huffington Post* diagnoses the issue with toxic friends in a similar way: 'They're unhappy. Low spirits mark their lives. Always dissatisfied, complaining, discontent and misery are their companions' (Davis, 2016).

In similar ways, the discourse of toxic friendships resonates with an instrumental form of reasoning, as follows:

Being honest with yourself means looking at the friendship and asking, "Why am I still friends with this person?" If the answer is something other than they give you support, love, motivation, inspiration, encouragement, laughter, or any other positive emotions or outcomes, ask yourself this: "How do I feel after I hang out with this person?" Do you feel drained, bad about yourself, doubtful, depressed, frustrated, scared, angry, or in any other way negative

after most of your meetings? Do you dread seeing this person? When this person calls, do you avoid it? If you've answered yes, it's time to reassess the reason that you're keeping this friendship alive. (Amy, 2011).

As indicated above, readers are urged to 'reassess' their friendship and examine its short and long-term effects to one's wellbeing. The way that toxic friendship is represented here also fits with Gill and Orgad's (2018) discussion of the accelerated rhythm of 'fast feeling' where sadness and hurt should be quickly replaced with happiness and optimism. However, a common formulation of this friendship is as of a manageable problem, to detoxify oneself and take control of their personal wellbeing one must end the friendship:

Immunization against toxic friends. Most people lack the courage to let go. Tackling your personal relationships will give you the confidence to achieve your dream. Firing a toxic friend is not hard. Realize you can only spend time with sparkling stars. And that begins with letting go of toxic people. Now is the time to honor your authentic values and break loose. (Davis, 2016)

In the above quote, by Ann Davis for *The Huffington Post*, readers are instructed to break free from these ties as a way to heal, break loose and embrace positivity. Becoming immune then is a self-managerial and a self-improving project which dictates monitoring one's relations and taking an entrepreneurial approach to the self. These imperatives can be found in the next extract taken from a *Wikihow* guide on how to end a toxic friendship.

Let the person know you don't want to see them again. Toxic people may struggle to understand your needs in any given situation. Toxic people tend to take advantage of empathetic, trusting people and may try to see you again after you break things off. Make it very clear that you do not wish to see them in the future and will not be contacting them from here. It's okay to be a little blunt here. Again, don't be aggressive, but be firm. Say something like, "I do not want to see you again, so please do not try to contact me." Toxic people may have trouble letting go, and attempt to get you back into their folds. To make it clear you were serious about not wanting further contact, ignore texts, calls, and emails. You may want to block the person's number. (Chernyak, ND).

These recommendations can be seen as a combination of various neoliberal imperatives with stress entrepreneurship and self-optimization. It also corresponds with a prevalent new liberal requirement for resilience. Implicit in this tone, then, is the message that one must control their own fate and future happiness (Ahmed, 2010a), by being assertive and instrumental in their friendship ties. This mindset is also repeated in the following piece:

'If any of these signs [of a toxic friendship] sound painfully familiar, it's time to have a difficult but necessary talk with your friend. And if they fail to take

your concerns seriously, it's probably time to cut ties. Don't stay in a toxic friendship — you deserve a friend who respects and trusts you.' (Young, ND).

The authoritative tone in which these instructions are given are common to many of the texts on toxic friendships. In this vein, ending a toxic friendship is promoted as a courageous and healthy action, often under the guise of 'self-care', with the texts taking an abstracted, individualised view that glosses over the possible reasons why people may maintain these relations or find them difficult to part with. This rhetoric also overlooks the social and situated contexts for the toxic friend's unhappiness.

The articulation of the readers as extremely vulnerable resonates with Furedi's (2004) conceptualisation of the vulnerable self. For Furedi therapy culture has produced a "passive sense of the self" and in many ways the analyzed texts echo this paradigm. As the extract illustrates, toxic friendship echoes the neo-liberal wellness culture and its ideal subjects. In many ways it also builds on a victim-enemy binary in which the toxic friend is the only one bearing responsibility of the difficult friendships.

An article by Hannah Korrel in *The Sydney Morning Herald* emphasizes the self-care involved in ending a toxic friendship:

The day you acknowledge and accept that good friends deserve good friends is the day you will stop settling for less and attracting more. And if you ditch the toxic friend, not only do you save the money, time and effort they'd have guzzled up, you can actually reinvest that energy into something for you. (Korrel, 2020).

The articulation of unhappiness as another indication of toxicity provides a formula for readers to eradicate negativity rather than accommodate or address it. It presents friendship as a relation which should be evaluated and terminated should it encroach on the 'good' friend's sense of wellbeing. In her seminal work on happiness Ahmed (2010a) explored happiness as a form of world making and how its very promise justifies ideologies which direct our desires. The discursive framing of the toxic friend is perceived as a source for the reader's distress thereby defying the promise, and what might claim, the imperative of happiness.

## **Discussion**

The mediated discourse of toxic friendship clearly touches a social nerve. Evidently, friendship relations can be an area of great complexity and we have considered the analysed texts as a significant site where contemporary beliefs and expectations about friendships are articulated. We argue here that the proliferation of digital discussions about toxic friendships provides discursive resources through which issues of emotional suffering and unbalanced reciprocity among friends can be addressed. Hence the discourse on toxic friendships offers a significant lens to study how certain cultural scripts of friendships and friendship troubles are articulated and produced in contemporary digital media.

It seems that many of the texts situate friendship as an important personal tie, in so far as it fits into a narrow definition involving a carefully balanced exchange. In the case of the toxic friend there is little encouragement to work on or invest in these ties. This is reminiscent of Flemke's (2001) argument that friendship is marginalized as a significant relationship within therapeutic professions. Furthermore, she attributes this lack of interest to the ways in which patriarchal beliefs continue to determine what is worthy of clinical intervention. Relatedly and drawing on her analysis, it could be argued that marriage and family therapy are institutionalized and widespread while friendship related therapy is not as common. This could possibly explain the appeal of these texts and their burgeoning presence in digital media today as they fill a lacuna in dealing and coping with difficult friendships.

Our study thus has provided a deeper understanding of the ways in which neoliberal and therapeutic ideologies influence the ways friendships are imagined. By promoting entrepreneurial selfhood, 'happy friendships' alongside the pathologization of difficult friendships, we have argued that the toxic friendship discourse lies at the intersection of various social ideological domains, including positive thinking, therapeutic, neo-liberal and wellness culture as well as adhering to idealized and oversimplified versions of friendship. As we have shown, the discursive construction of toxic friendships is formulated in the context of neoliberal rationalities and modes of therapeutic governance which in this case simplify nuanced realities.

In the illustrative examples assembled here, digital texts propagate binary prescriptions of friendships, in line with the ideologies of self-improvement and wellness so prevalent in contemporary social media. Our analysis has also allowed us to understand how ideals of friendship loom over these accounts of toxic friendships. The focus on numerical symptoms, ranging from four to fifty, checklists and self-examination quizzes encourages self-control and self-care can hail readers to end the toxic friendship, as self-governing subjects committed above all to self-care. In that sense, they are reminiscent of many mediated self-help texts, which underscore various self-governing techniques that promise a healthy and prosperous well-being.

However, the case study of the discourse on toxic friendship affords readers an opportunity for reflection, in which they are called to work and manage their friendship relations and, in this light, one of way of reading these texts is as a serious invitation to evaluate and reflect on these relationships. This could be particularly valuable in a social context where there are no clear institutionalized scripts of how to cope with and end difficult friendships (Eramian and Mallory, 2020). Against this uncertainty, the discursive formulas presented here provide a clear-cut formula with identifiable symptoms, social rules and a promise of liberation through employing techniques of self-governance and self-care. However the evaluation of friendships through such metrics ignores the ambivalences of everyday friendships, and fails to address its complex nature.

Lastly, toxicity emerges as an all defining buzzword for difficult relations, power relations and various forms of suffering and abuse and coheres with the ethical neoliberal injunction to work and take care of the self. In our concluding remarks we thus wish to advocate the need to further theorize friendships, and difficult friendships in particular. Our study joins a new body of scholarship about difficult friendships

(Davies and Heaphy, 2011; Smart *et al*, 2012; Eramian and Mallory 2020); Heaphy and Davies, 2012) and join (Mallory et al, 2019) in exploring friendships as an analytical category (Ibid) and as an idiom to talk and work out affinity, amity, and close social relations. More specifically, expanding the theoretical framework we use for the study of friendship is vital for new imaginaries which can extend the binaries of toxic friendships versus happy ones and examine difficult friendships in changing social contexts and in different locations. Cultivating this line of inquiry is vital for stimulating further research and establishing a critical *sociology of friendships*, committed to developing new conceptual tools to examine friendships while acknowledging the social conditions that shape them.

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