

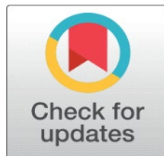
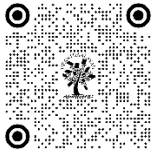


JOKER MEMES AS A FORM OF EXPRESSING INNER THOUGHTS: A CHARACTER ANALYSIS OF JOKER WITH REFERENCE TO THE THEATRE OF CRUELTY

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ABSTRACT

The term 'Theatre of Cruelty' was coined by the French theatre director, Antonin Artaud (1986-1948), in 1932, and it was a widely debated concept in that decade. The 'Theatre of Cruelty' is more concerned with the audience's sense experience than with dialogue and content. The term the theatre of cruelty offers a ground-breaking concept that aims to cultivate profound and immersive theatrical barriers between performers and audience members. Through its deliberate efforts to elicit intense emotional responses and challenge established theatrical conventions, it captivates by providing a transformative and boundary-breaking experience. The presence of the idea of the theatre of cruelty can be seen in films such as 'The Joker' and 'Batman'. According to various studies, the film character Joker is influencing real-world violence. Traditionally, the role of the Joker, a clown character in the circus, is to create a comic sense among the audience. The Joker usually creates false himself and his pain and sadness within himself and expresses happiness outside to make the audience happy or create relief. In due course, it turned into a creepy clown, a clown carrying violence. Through the films 'The Joker' and 'Batman', the Joker's character gradually evolved into a celebrity anarchist. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people throughout the world made memes of the Joker character with violent elements to express their feelings and to anticipate attention and care. The Joker has become a multilayered character. People started to enjoy the dark characteristics of the Joker character in the films more than the comic elements of the Joker character. With the help of secondary sources and data collected through social media, newspapers, and articles, the study attempts to understand memes as a form of expressing inner thoughts concerning the theatre of cruelty.

Keywords: Joker, Violence, Theatre of Cruelty, Memes, COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

In general terms, a joker refers to an individual who enjoys creating humour or engaging in playful antics with the intention of eliciting laughter from an audience. However, in due course, the character Joker has been constructed in movies with multiple layers of human emotions, not merely making the audience laugh. For example, the Batman (1966) movie portrayed the joker as colourful and light-hearted. In Batman (1989), the Joker was a mix of gangster and lunatic with a sinister style. In The Dark Knight (2008), a more transformative portrayal of the joker can be found, with a darker and more psychologically intense version. In the

movie *Suicide Squad* (2016) Joker with tattoos has a modern look and a gangster-like appearance. And in the 2019 *Joker* movie, the Joker character is portrayed as a deranged guy with madness who becomes a criminal mastermind. In due course, it can be seen that the Joker character has been interpreted to express the utmost pain and criminality through the popular laughing face image of the Joker.

The concept of theatre of cruelty and the Joker character from the movies are two entirely different portrayals from two different mediums. The concept of theatre of cruelty developed from theatre practice, and the character Joker, though developed in DC Comics, became popular in movies. The word "cruelty" does not refer to actual physical harm or violence but to the notion of confronting the audience with the pure, fundamental feelings and realities of human existence. According to Artaud, society had transformed people into sick, restrained beings, and the actual purpose of the theatre of cruelty was to free humanity from these restraints and unleash each person's innate vitality. He suggested doing away with the stage as a physical barrier between actors and the audience and creating mythical spectacles with verbal incantations, groans, screams, pulsating lighting effects, and enormous stage puppets and accessories. This study is trying to identify the resemblance of cruelty through the character Joker and also trying to find out the reason why the character Joker is much celebrated, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was widely visible that people were using Joker memes on social media to express their emotions and feelings. The character Joker is providing very long-lasting experiences and memories in the audience's mind. And the theatre of cruelty also exhibits a very intense performance that also lasts in the audience's mind in a very deep way, as both the theatre of Cruelty and the character of the Joker relate to emotions.

From its introduction on, the Joker character gained wide appreciation and a huge fan base because of its external appearance, projected smiley face, body language, and style of presentation. The Joker is known for his unpredictable nature, chaotic demeanour, and twisted sense of humour. In due course, the Joker is often depicted as a criminal mastermind, constantly challenging the boundaries of sanity and morality. The Joker has become a symbol of psychological complexity and remains an enduring and captivating antagonist in the realm of fictional villains. Slowly, this character occupied a space in the stores and cinemas and, parallelly, in the audience's mind as well. However, in the beginning, the creators did not consider Joker a main object in their creations. But gradually, this character got a clear space in all the creations, like cinemas and stories, and the creators also built a backstory of the origin of the character Joker. The writers purposefully created the characters in this way in order to pique the audience's interest. This deliberate approach resulted in narratives rich with supernatural elements. Supernatural stories and characters are for the amusement of the audience, but they don't represent the real lives of common men. By realizing this, the creators of the Joker movies gradually changed the history of the character into a common story that could easily connect with a common audience. Todd Phillips and Christopher Nolan created the common man and introduced it to the audience. The audience welcomed the new Joker, and they considered the character to be a common man like them, which gained huge acceptance. Slowly, the character started to grow in the audience's mind, and so many video clips, memes, and images started to spread. Then memes and quotes about the character started to go viral very quickly [Collins \(2019\)](#).

The concept of the theatre of cruelty was introduced by Antonin Artaud in his book *The Theatre and its Doubles*. In his work 'The Theatre and its Double,' Antonin Artaud theorised a surrealist theatrical style known as the Theatre of Cruelty. The

theatre is impossible without a component of brutality at the core of every spectacle, it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds in our current condition of degeneration, he contends. Artaud used the term "cruelty" to describe a violent, austere, physical resolve to shatter the false reality. According to Artaud's expression, the concept of deception permeates the perception like an enveloping shroud rather than sadism or causing pain [Ashraf \(2013\)](#). In this concept, he breaks so many cliché concepts of theatre. Artaud focuses more on the actors in his concept than on external factors like set, light, etc. According to his thoughts, the actor's body is like hieroglyphics. In the theatre of cruelty, the actor is connected to the spectator in such a way that the audience can smell the actors in the performance. Through the intensity of emotions and feelings, this concept gained huge acceptance in the theatre industry. [Tripney \(2017\)](#)

The character joker, known for his unpredictable and chaotic nature, shares intriguing connections with the concept of theatre of cruelty developed by Antonin Artaud. The theatre of cruelty aimed to shock and disrupt the audience's perception of reality through intense and visceral experiences. Similarly, the Joker embodies a theatrical embodiment of cruelty, challenging societal norms and expectations. With his anarchic and sadistic tendencies, the joker disrupts the established order, provoking discomfort and questioning conventional moral codes. Like the theatre of cruelty, the joker forces the audience to confront their deepest fears and explore the darker corners of the human psyche, blurring the boundaries between performer and spectator in a disorienting yet captivating way. Both the joker and the theatre of cruelty push to examine the complexities of human existence, revealing the unsettling aspects of our own nature in the process.

Research on the Theatre of Cruelty and the character Joker holds significant untapped potential. There is a compelling need to explore the influence of the Theatre of Cruelty on global theatrical practices and cinematic traditions across diverse cultures. Comparative studies offer valuable insights into how Artaud's ideas have permeated theatre and related domains worldwide. Despite years of study and experimentation, critical research gaps persist within this avant-garde theatrical concept. Much of the existing literature predominantly delves into its historical context and Artaud's original concepts, leaving a void in our understanding of its contemporary applications in both theatre and film. Moreover, the limited research addressing how modern audiences respond to Theatre of Cruelty-inspired performances underscores the crucial significance of comprehending audience reception and the consequences of such productions. Given its inclination to push boundaries and evoke intense emotions, there is a pressing need for ethical considerations and the exploration of potential ethical dilemmas inherent in the practice of the Theatre of Cruelty.

Addressing these research gaps not only promises to deepen our understanding of the Theatre of Cruelty but also underscores its relevance in today's dynamic theatrical landscape. As we delve into these research areas, the iconic movie character Joker could provide an intriguing lens for researchers and scholars to further enrich this field of study. This study aims to uncover the intricate connection between the Theatre of Cruelty and the portrayal of the Joker character. Additionally, it seeks to elucidate the reasons behind the widespread use of Joker quotes and memes across social media as vehicles for expressing people's emotions. Furthermore, this paper endeavours to discern how these two concepts attract and endure in people's minds.

1) The Multifaceted Portrayal of The Character Joker:

The Joker made his inaugural appearance in the DC comic book series *Batman* on April 25, 1940, [Alter \(2019\)](#), leaving an enduring imprint on the realm of villainous narratives. Like all the other villainous characters in *Batman*, the Joker also appeared without any backstories or flashbacks. In the beginning, the creators were Bill Finger, Bob Kane, and Jerry Robinson of the *Batman* comic, who marked *Batman* as more powerful and capable of killing the Joker as well. However, the editors of the comic later reconsidered, making the character more intriguing by allowing him to survive multiple encounters. Consequentially, the Joker transforms from a psychotic murderer into a mad prankster, resulting in a better reception from the market. In 1951, one of the Joker's creators provided him with an origin story in the detective comics titled 'The Man Behind the Red Hoods.' In this edition, co-creator Bill Finger reveals that the Joker had already committed crimes under a different alias known as 'Red Hood.' According to the story, while trying to escape from *Batman*, the Joker fell into a vat of chemical water, which turned his skin white and his hair green. This incident led to the iconic appearance of the Joker. For this transformation, the creator, Finger, gave a skeleton to the Joker.

In 1966, the *Batman* TV series started, and the character Joker also got a cinematic view along with *Batman*. Adam West gave a live-action, three-dimensional form to the Joker. Cesar Romero performed as the Joker in the *Batman* TV series. [Martinson \(1966\)](#) He appeared in very few episodes during this series. From these episodes, the audience got a more detailed backstory about the character, i.e., the Joker is a high school dropout, brilliant at hypnotism, and a master of disguise in crime. In one episode of this series, the character Joker appears without makeup, and it is stated that this is a put-on. The year 1988 marked the end of the then-existing Joker stories and the beginning of a new era of Joker series. Alan Moore adapted the character Joker into his graphic novel *Killing Joke*, and he created a Joker mythos. According to his version, the Joker was an engineer with good manners in a chemical factory. To achieve his dream of becoming a stand-up comedian, he left his job. But he failed to create jokes. Then he planned to help some criminals destroy the chemical factory to earn money for his pregnant wife. But unfortunately, his wife and unborn baby died in an accident during pregnancy. But at the time of the crime, *Batman* appears and scares the Joker. At that time, a pipe sweeps him out. During that time, the entire appearance of that engineer is changed, and he appears as a Joker because of chemical reactions inside the pipe. That physical transformation and the wife's death transform him into a villain—the Joker [Alter \(2019\)](#).

From there on, different stories about Joker and his appearances came out. In different years, the Joker was portrayed in different animations, films, and TV series. During these periods, this character became a celebrity villain in the audience's mind all over the world without any distractions. In 2019, the renowned portrayal of the Joker character by Todd Phillips came to prominence. Todd Philip gives the most convincing story to the mass audience about the Joker through Arthur Fleck. On purpose, he avoids the supernatural and illogical stories of a Joker, like the chemical pipe transformation and all. Todd Philip and Arthur Fleck gave a socially relevant story to the Joker. In this version, Arthur is a comedian who lives with his elderly mother. And he was also treated for mental illness. According to his version, his mental health issues and continued marginalization pushed him to become the Joker. Here, it's purely visible that society has turned into a villain. The people started to forget all the other illogical stories and supernatural power jokes and started to accept this common man as the Joker. The character Joker emerges, taking

on a life of its own, entrenched in narratives and entrenched in the psyche of the masses.

2) Expressing Inner Meanings - The Theatre of Cruelty:

The evolution of the 'Theatre of Cruelty' emerged in conjunction with the surrealist movement in 1931, by the French playwright and director Antonin Artaud. It is not a specific play or performance but rather a theoretical framework for a radical and innovative approach to theatre. The theatre of cruelty clearly says that "without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, theatre is not possible" [Artaud \(1970\)](#). The key characteristics of the theatre of cruelty explain that dance and gestures can create deeper meaning than words. Extreme emotions and action result in a lack of control and that plays are also a release for dreams and hidden emotions. There are no limits to how theatre can stimulate emotion or how to bring this about. The Theatre of Cruelty emphasizing intense, visceral experiences, the rejection of realism, and the use of the body to provoke deep emotional responses from both performers and the audience. Mainly, the theatre of cruelty aims to make the audience move, be shocked, and be involved in the performance. The creator also formulated a manifesto for this theatrical approach, as part of the book 'The Theatre and its Doubles' by Antonin Artaud, the founder of the theatre of cruelty [Artaud \(1970\)](#).

Artaud's investigation aimed to communicate theatre directly to the audience with greater power, devoid of theatrical gimmicks. He expressed deep disappointment with the prevailing theatre concepts in France at that time. The French theatre was characterized by rigidity, focusing heavily on external elements such as elaborate sets and lighting. However, Artaud's encounter with a group of theatre practitioners from Bali who performed in France left a profound impact on him. He was particularly influenced by the strong communication and core values of Asian theatre. As a result of this experience, Artaud conceived the idea of the theatre of cruelty, which began to take shape in his mind. It's important to note that the term "cruelty" here does not refer to violence or harm but rather serves as a means of communication, akin to languages. Artaud believed that all communication mediums have their limitations in conveying certain things, and he sought to transcend these limitations through the theatre of cruelty. To do so, he veered away from traditional language-based communication and instead explored the expressive potential of the human body on stage [Finter \(1996\)](#).

Artaud's output in terms of written plays or directed productions was notably limited. However, his ideas greatly influenced numerous theatre personalities, such as Grotowski and Peter Brook, who went on to produce many significant works inspired by Artaud's ideas. Grotowski's theatre, for example, emphasizes the centrality of the body as the primary content, while Peter Brook's concept of 'empty space' often involves the breaking the fourth wall, blurring the boundary between actors and the audience, has a link to the theatre of cruelty. These approaches all have philosophical underpinnings. Artaud referred to his acting process as "hieroglyphics" and considered the actor's body as an alphabet. In this context, the actor's body is transformed into a set of symbols, much like Chinese hieroglyphics, enabling it to directly communicate emotions and expressions to the audience. The theatre of cruelty, according to Artaud, eschews external embellishments, and great performers like Grotowski believed it should be performed in a natural and unfiltered manner. This form of theatre facilitates direct and intimate communication between actors and the audience, blurring the boundaries and eliminating the traditional fourth wall. Artaud's exploration of the theatre of cruelty sought to achieve intensity, emotional impact, and surprise in theatrical

performances by tapping into the powerful language of the human body, without relying on conventional theatrical elements [Britannica \(1998\)](#).

These parallels offer insights into the portrayal of the Joker character in movies. The character's physicality, symbolizing chaos, and intense emotions, aligns with Artaud's vision of direct, visceral expression, often bypassing conventional theatrical elements for emotional impact and surprise. The Joker's portrayal captures the spirit of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, provoking intense emotional responses by tapping into the raw power of the human body. [Simon \(2009\)](#)

3) The Joker Unleashed - Exploring Theatrical Cruelty Within Reach of the Audience:

The audience's perception of a villain is often temporary and fleeting, whether it's in a play or a movie. However, "The Joker" stands apart, having garnered a substantial global fan base. Among the various portrayals, Todd Philip's version, brilliantly portrayed by Joaquin Phoenix, has been widely accepted and earned him an Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role. People are naturally drawn to stories that feel genuine and relatable to society, and Todd Philip's Joker's background story resonates deeply, making it more authentic and relatable compared to other interpretations of the character. Heath Ledger's portrayal of the Joker in 2008 was another beloved and embraced rendition of the character. Both Phoenix and Ledger managed to connect with audiences on a profound level, evoking a range of emotions through their performances. Their portrayals have become more than just characters; they have become familiar figures intertwined with the collective consciousness of the common people. [Phillips \(2019\)](#)

Some elements easily connect the Joker characters to people, especially the character's pain, social conditioning, marginalization, blame, emotions, and anarchistic behaviors, as well as the actor's performance. However, what's more important in this case is that these kinds of human natures are emphasized. In previous stories about the Jokers, they all had supernatural backstories. But in the cases of Todd Philip and Heath Ledger, the stories were told or visualized more believably. Throughout these portrayals, the character engages the audience in an emotional, psychological, philosophical, and believable way. Through these examples, it is evident that the Joker is depicted as an ordinary man who has endured and struggled with various challenges, such as his career, passions, family, and more. This complexity makes it easier for the audience to accept and empathize with the character, even when he manipulates his criminal side. Of course, the Joker is a criminal and has committed heinous crimes like murder. However, the storytelling beautifully transcends these negative aspects. [Nolen \(2008\)](#)

The character's exploration of power and society also adds depth to his portrayal, presenting him as an anarchist. The Joker is a man who has been marginalized by the patriarchal world, leading him to embrace anarchism. However, he is more motivated by the ideology of chaos and its symbolism than by the specific means to achieve it. In *Batman: The Animated Series*, presented by Mark Hamill, the Joker embodies both pleasure and violence, but Heath Ledger's portrayal puts intellect before emotion. He is depicted as an empiricist, a moral philosopher, and a prankster. In reality, his motivation is to demonstrate how abolishing the state will lead to a more libertarian and equitable society. This contempt for order makes Ledger's Joker scarier than other portrayals. Christopher Nolan, the director, and writer of *The Dark Knight*, called Ledger's Joker "a psychologically credible anarchist" and depicted the character in a socio-political landscape. The character's use of emotional stories and a distinct presentation style is another reason why people love this character. For example, the dialogue "Do you know how I got these

scars?" presents multiple answers that can easily evoke public and emotional responses. All of these stories are deeply connected to common people and are portrayed in a relatable manner. The Joker's traumas, such as facing child abuse or self-inflicted wounds, are central to the narratives. Consequently, the character's stories, expressions, emotions, appearance, and every other aspect leave a lasting impression on the audience. It is almost as if the character breaks the fourth wall, transcending the silver screen, and enters the emotional minds of the audience.

In the theatre of cruelty, the actor breaks the concept of the fourth wall, and the performance is completely dependent on the actor's performance rather than external gimmicks. While an actor is performing a play using the method of the theatre of cruelty, the audience can feel the actor's breathing, smell, and all. All experiments done in the theatre are completely based on what the creator wants to convey and what experience they want to convey. All the work that happened on the stage was based on the experience of the audience. It is reconstructing the unpracticed and occurrences of the audience. The same is happening in this theatre of cruelty by Artaud. Here, the theatre of cruelty provides a very intensive experience for the spectators [Fagel \(2018\)](#). It is a very simple approach that uses more symbolic stagecraft with minimal things and also more with the actors' bodies. Acting in this scenario changes from technical to more emotional and passionate. Every pageant contains more physical and objective elements. From the cliché spectacle, Artaud changes to an intensively experienced spectacle. Always exhibiting unexpected combinations of visuals and images. Through this intimacy, the audience can experience all the emotions, feelings, touch, smell, and voice of the actors. So, this is creating a deep emotional intimacy between the actors and the audience. A shocking experience is exhibited to the audience here. These unexpected images and the unexpected potency of acting and performance give the audience an unforgettable dramatic experience. So, it is an emotionally moving performance from the actor to the spectators. [Moore \(1988\)](#)

2. JOKER ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

During the COVID-19 pandemic, prolonged lockdowns confined people to their homes. Initially, many believed the situation would resolve quickly, and some even celebrated the lockdown as a temporary vacation, spending quality time with family. However, as the lockdown persisted, emotional and mental health challenges like depression, anxiety, identity crises, and mood swings emerged. It's important to note that not everyone experienced these issues; some individuals enjoyed this period and even found creative inspiration. [Gunn \(n.d.\)](#)

To cope with their feelings and connect with others, people turned to social media as a platform for self-expression. Instead of using words alone, they employed "memes" – images, videos, or other media that rapidly disseminate among internet users to convey their emotions. Notably, the character of the Joker from various movies, whose backstory involves isolation and marginalization, resonated with the struggles people faced during the pandemic. The parallels between the Joker's narrative and individuals' mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and identity crises, inspired them to utilize Joker memes and memes in general as a means of self-expression. [Burton \(1989\)](#)

Several memorable quotes from movies like "The Dark Knight" and "Joker" gained popularity and were widely circulated as memes. These quotes, such as "If You're Good at Something, Never Do It for Free!" and "All It Takes Is a Little Push!", resonated with people because of their relevance to mental health and emotional

struggles during the lockdown. For instance, quotes like "I used to think that my life was a tragedy, but now I realize it's a comedy" and "All I have are negative thoughts" struck a chord with those experiencing difficult emotions during this period. One popular Joker meme during the COVID-19 pandemic featured the dialogue: "What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash? You get what you...n' deserve!" This meme highlighted the impact of society's treatment on individuals' mental health. Another widely shared meme featured the quote, "The worst part of having a mental illness is that people expect you to behave as if you don't." This quote resonated with those struggling with mental health issues as it reflected the challenges of societal expectations. The use of Joker memes during the COVID-19 pandemic was a creative and expressive way for people to cope with the emotional and mental health challenges brought on by the lockdown. The character's experiences mirrored their feelings of isolation and marginalization, making these memes a means of sharing their thoughts and emotions during this difficult time. [Brubaker & Mahnke \(2005\)](#)

In the context of the Theatre of Cruelty, this phenomenon highlights how artistic expressions, even in unconventional forms like memes, can serve as a cathartic means of confronting and articulating complex emotional and psychological experiences, mirroring Artaud's emphasis on the direct, visceral communication of human emotions and struggles in theatre.

3. CONCLUSION

The shared commonality between the Theatre of Cruelty and the Joker lies in their adept utilization of emotions and intense performances, resulting in a striking resemblance in their impact on the audience. In the case of the Joker, this emotional element motivates people to express their feelings through memes, videos, and quotes, particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic characterized by widespread social isolation and distancing from social connections. Social media emerged as the platform through which individuals indirectly conveyed their emotions, with quotes, memes, and trolls serving as accessible means of doing so. The Joker character's portrayal of these emotions and situations resonated deeply with the audience, prompting people to adapt and relate to it.

The exploration uncovers a profound interplay between popular culture, artistic expression, and introspective psychology. Through the prism of the Joker character, one witnesses the potent role of memes as a medium through which individuals navigate and articulate their innermost thoughts, emotions, and struggles. Simultaneously, the Theatre of Cruelty, with its unwavering emphasis on intense, visceral experiences and the direct transmission of emotions through the human body, provides an illuminating framework for comprehending the resonance of the Joker character in contemporary culture. The character's unique capacity to provoke profound emotional responses reverberates with Antonin Artaud's vision of theatre as a conduit for connecting with raw, primal emotions.

As individuals traverse the digital terrain of meme culture, they encounter a realm where personal struggles and intricate inner thoughts are grappled with. The Joker character, with its portrayal of profound psychological turmoil and societal estrangement, becomes a symbol through which people articulate their own experiences, whether rooted in mental health, isolation, or identity. Within this confluence of theatre, cinema, and digital expression, the enduring relevance of humanity's innate need to connect, share, and navigate the complexities of inner worlds becomes evident. Joker memes, in their capacity to provoke introspection and spark conversations, serve as an embodiment of the dynamic interplay between

art and technology in engaging with the deepest thoughts and emotions. They function as both a mirror reflecting struggles and a canvas for creative expressions.

Ultimately, this exploration underscores the timeless power of storytelling and artistic expression to illuminate the intricacies of the human psyche, transcending the boundaries of medium and challenging society to confront innermost thoughts in the ever-evolving digital age. However, it is imperative to underscore that such emotional expressions should never serve as justification or manipulation for criminal activities. Criminal behaviour remains inherently wrong, and this article neither advocates nor condones it. [Boussiac \(2015\)](#)

This exploration of the interplay between the Theatre of Cruelty and the character of the Joker opens doors to numerous avenues for future research. Subsequent studies could delve into the precise mechanisms and cognitive processes through which emotional connections are forged between audiences and performers, whether in live theatre or cinematic experiences. Additionally, investigating the evolution of emotional expressions and their role in contemporary artistic and cultural contexts, particularly in the realm of digital media, promises to be a fertile area of inquiry. Furthermore, examining the ethical implications of employing intense emotions in artistic representations, especially within the context of the Theatre of Cruelty and its modern adaptations, presents an intriguing avenue for future exploration.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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