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A Collection of Short Culture Stories

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Thesis Portfolio Submission #1:

Abstract:

The aim of this particular story was to explain the unexplainable with a device that evokes emotions at the most personal level. This personal essay enters my psyche through music or rather playlists. I've experienced rock bottom when it comes to dealing with my own thoughts. It's a consistent theme in a society engulfed with an array of mental health issues. I found that curating playlists is the singular outlet that slows my anxiety, confusion and the utter chaos that I deal with.

Source List: Personal Essay

How Making Playlists Slowed My Brain Down

Making playlists opens a place in my brain where things are pellucid, a matrix full of ideas with a singular sound at the center that amplifies where words can't.

I am not a stranger to anxiety. I am not a stranger to confusion. I am not a stranger to feeling lost. But, I am a stranger to lucidity. I'm a scatterbrain, and the thought of it induces vertigo. It's a feeling almost akin to sound itself. I just want to know what it means to slow my brain down.

I was born in 1998, only to have spent a quarter of my life engulfed in trying to figure out why my brain acts the way it does. And as a writer, I know firsthand what it means to sit in complete puzzlement as your brain tries to conjure up something that you question is even worth your time. I may sound impatient, but it's my brain doing the talking. That's where music comes in.

So, music. It starts my day. It helps get me through a three-hour lecture in grad school. It slows my world down. It serves as the author of my life. But, I found solace in the art of curation. Curating playlists helps us piece together the puzzle that is our thoughts, acts as our own personal therapy session, or in my case, indirectly conveys my emotions, and quite honestly keeps me from going batshit insane.

There was a moment in my senior year at Morehouse College when I experienced something. To this day, I'm not sure if it was a panic attack or something else, but it felt as if my brain was moving at a hundred miles an hour. I tried to calm down, to focus, but nothing worked. I kept spiraling. Pacing in my tiny dorm room, I reflected on the week I had, which was full of confusion, frustration, and angst.

I just wanted to smooth things out in my mind. So I began piecing together my first-ever playlist. I titled it "à la mode".

In cooking, à la mode refers to a dish served with ice cream. I wanted each song to feel like that scoop of vanilla ice cream: smooth and sweet. I started with Too Many Tears by Durand Jones & The Indications, a short and sweet heartbreak ballad that cruises along a soft tempo. I followed that with

Sea of Cloud by Nujabes, a smooth odyssey filled with ambient jazz rhythms - then added, Cosmic Lines by BOY DUDE, a sultry, chillwave jam that's an instant callback to the '80s.

Listening to each of these songs gave me chills similar to that very first bite of ice cream. My mind began to slow down. My thoughts were suddenly clear, and all I could think about was that sensation of eating vanilla ice cream. So I began to piece together other songs that fed that sensation like adding your favorite toppings to ice cream.

Since then, playlists have become almost like a kind of communication, whether it's connecting with myself, or opening up a new line of communication with others. For some people, playlists can be a form of storytelling, and there's often a theme at the center: night drives, romance, or social justice. It's all about understanding your audience.

I work differently. There aren't any themes; instead, I empty my mind, press shuffle in my music library, and let sounds do the talking. There are zero thoughts until I come across a particular sound that piques my ear. It could be something as simple as a chord progression or rather a robust saxophone solo that blows me away. I concentrate on one particular sound that eventually leads me down an abyss of finding similar music that matches it.

Concentration is not a strong suit for me. Even ordering ice cream at a parlor is a struggle for me. My mind wanders when I try to select a flavor. The insurmountable pressure to choose one flavor is hell for me and sometimes I choose a flavor I don't really want. In retrospect, that situation may have inspired the first playlist I made. But it's frustrating dealing with a brain that goes 100 miles an hour.

My motto is to take things slow, but I am not very good at it. Sometimes I don't think before I speak. It's hard to hold dialogue because I stutter certain words or rather repeat myself. It also sounds as if I should get checked for ADHD, but that can wait. I'm focused on streamlining my thoughts.

And that is where the art of curation illuminates. This is why I always have a tune in my head. This is why I'm always trying to find a singular sound that evokes an intoxicating feeling of relief. Therapy can take many forms, but for me, the most powerful mental management comes from the sharp layering of beats, the swing and sway of song.

My process for curation takes months. The latest playlist I made took five months to complete. It's titled "cosmic dust" which captures the ethereal, slow & steady tempo aligned with the first song, "Money Music by Surprise Chef." The song is pure instrumentation but its genius lies in its simplicity. A moderate tempo beat loops until the final minute when the previous tempo evaporates and surrenders itself to one of the smoothest rhythms I've ever heard, similar to a song from Sade's Love Deluxe album. It left me in a trance.

And I didn't want that feeling to escape, so I scoured my vast music library comprised of thousands of songs to find those intricate moments that encapsulate the same feeling. The final product is the spitting image of how my brain operates. I chose nine different genres of music to fit into one confined space similar to countless brainwaves occupying my head. It's seamless.

But, the immense joy I feel comes with sharing the final product. It's a call for understanding. I get that not everyone is going to remotely care about one playlist out of the thousands that exist. Don't worry, I prepared for this. That preparation lies in my passion for music. Picture a musician who is

playing a gig in front of only a few people. That person is still going to give it their all despite an audience or lack thereof.

It's that burning desire to showcase your thoughts to others. Sharing this work I call a passion gives me an indescribable feeling. Saying that I am happy because of it would severely undersell my true sense. It goes beyond that. Each person who receives a playlist from me follows an intricate pattern that occurs in my brain. A brainwave exists in each song that I chose. Sure, that can be perceived as weird but it's all about connection for me. Each song on any playlist I make carefully channels the multitude of moments that brought me pure bliss. And what's sweeter than sharing that bliss with the rest of the world?

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Thesis Portfolio Submission #2:

Abstract:

This particular story aimed to explain the constant struggle that young entrepreneurs in India grapple with in the hemp industry. There is a new industry boiling up to the surface in India, but not everyone is on board with this potential economic booster. This story follows the journey of two Indian entrepreneurs on their path to use their passion as a career path that could possibly change lives for their communities.

These stories are followed by some historical context to help the reader understand where the hemp industry originates from and the inevitable politics that come into play. A third source is introduced to provide a legal understanding that brings both India and the United States together as the two countries and their entrepreneurs navigate through this industry.

Source List:

1. [Samsit Sehgal](#)- CEO of Qurist, communicated through Whatsapp/Email, and on arrival.
2. [Vignesh Murthy](#)- Owner of Wildleaf, communicated through Whatsapp/Email, and Zoom.
3. [Patrick Goggin](#)- Lawyer based in San Francisco, with experience in hemp policies. Communicated through email and Zoom.

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Misery Loves Company: An inside look into the struggle that entrepreneurs face in the hemp industry.

Samsit Sehgal, CEO of [Qurist](#), is passionate about a few things: family, friends, and sustainability. These passions are the result of a time filled with turmoil. His grandmother lost her husband back in 2005. And, his grandmother did not take her loss quite well.

“My Nani or (grandmother) started developing illness after illness. You name it, she’s had it.”

Sitting down at an upscale restaurant in the heart of New Delhi hearing the rest of this story was heartbreaking. To hear what his grandmother had gone through was tough to hear.

“There were tough moments. I would work on projects all day, then come home around 2 am to try to take care of her,” Sehgal said. “I mean, in the 21st century, there has to be some sort of new medicine that can be used for a wide variety of issues.”

It seemed as if there was no end in sight to her suffering. Then, Sehgal brought up the one product he believed could help.

He believes hemp is just one of many answers to health care with its ability to ease pain and sustainability because of its biodegradable nature. Sehgal used his passion and rebel spirit to open his startup selling hemp products.

He worked with Deloitte as a strategy consultant and brought his expertise to the world of sustainability, specifically with CBD. He worked on countless projects that involved different tech sectors across various industries. He planned on using that knowledge to sell his CBD oil through Qurist, his startup that covers most of New Delhi.

Another man by the name of Vignesh Murthy, a man in his late-20s, begins a soul-searching odyssey surrounding cannabis. He found his purpose in life by traveling around Europe in very dense, forested areas. And what he noticed changed his life forever.

“I used to travel a lot in nature-filled areas and noticed that the environment was being cut down. And I started to feel bad about trees, plants, and nature being destroyed. I couldn’t comprehend this feeling. So I began to research plants.”

Little did he know that a particular plant would steer his life in a different direction. Murthy began to pour all his time and energy into researching the history behind hemp. He examined India’s Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act which was issued in 1985. Then, he noticed a loophole where hemp is allowed to be researched for horticulture or medicinal purposes as opposed to the selling or cultivation of the plant.

“When I started back in 2012, everyone around me thought I was crazy. People thought I was wasting my life because I’ve been working towards something that’s nothing more than a drug.”

Murthy explained that there is a certain reputation you must uphold in India. You have to create an image surrounding an acceptable career path. It is the constant struggle between following a passion or conforming to societal norms. Murthy chose to follow his heart.

Murthy began attending NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development) events to get funding for his ongoing research. He was turned down because no one cared to listen to him.

“At the time, I was 20 years old. No one wanted to listen to a kid about this.”

Now, Murthy is the rightful owner of [Wildleaf](#), a Bangalore-based startup that sells CBD oil and Hemp flour. He collected samples of strains across the globe that contributed to his still ongoing research on why hemp can be beneficial to our bodies. With his startup and research, he does not seek only monetary gain but rather a cultural awakening surrounding one product.

There is a secret industry boiling to the surface. However, this industry may not be much of a secret to the rest of the world. It has been front and center in Indian culture for hundreds of years. The same came to be said for a place such as California. Young entrepreneurs alike are trying to take advantage of the opportunity that the cannabis plant provides. But, regulatory obstacles prevent entrepreneurs from sharing this secret with the global economy.

In India, the cannabis plant that consists of both hemp and marijuana is banned by the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act ([NDPS](#)) issued in 1985. This prohibits a person from cultivating, manufacturing, or selling any psychoactive substance.

Hemp is just a different name for cannabis. Cannabis strains that produce less than 0.3% of THC will always be considered hemp. So, it takes the psychoactive aspect out of cannabis leading to medicinal uses.

That is important to note. The negative connotation surrounding cannabis has affected an industry that could benefit millions. The monetary value of cannabis is skyrocketing in the United States, including California, which has legalized the selling and consumption of the product. California is a prime example of acting as the guinea pig in experimenting with this new industry.

Patrick Goggin, senior attorney at Hoban Law Group and chief counsel for the California Hemp Council, shared his background in hemp and the current climate surrounding this product.

“It’s all about policy and regulations. It’s the art of compromise, you have to be willing to give up something to get something.”

Goggin was always around policy with his father having a career in politics. Yet he shared the same epiphany with Murthy when he arrived at college back in 1986. In 2005, the [Industrial Hemp Farming Act](#) bill caught the attention of Goggin and farmers in California. The act allows industrial hemp to be farmed and cultivated without any restrictions. Goggin believed this was the turning point, but the bill kept getting shut down.

The bill was vetoed by government officials such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Kamala Harris who believed that industrial hemp should not be excluded from the definition of marijuana. That was until [Senate Bill 566](#).

The bill was signed into law in 2013 that “authorizes the commercial production of industrial hemp in California.” However, the bill was not put into effect until 2017. Goggin remembers the long, enduring process that dates over 12 years.

‘You have to maintain idealism but have some realism to complement it’, Goggin says.

Goggin understood the gravity of the situation when it comes to opening up a market for industrial hemp. According to the [USDA](#) (United States Department of Agriculture), the total value of hemp production totaled \$824 million in 2021. India only allows the growing and cultivation of hemp under the government's supervision in two states, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh. Thus, India relies on imports from Europe and North America.

In talking to both Sehgal and Murthy, there are clear issues surrounding the regulations of cannabis. The government and some tech companies have clamped down on allowing exports to places such as California, where CBD can be sold and where Sehgal and Murthy can do business. Tech companies such as Facebook do not run ads for Sehgal’s products although he can sell in the US market. This has hindered Sehgal’s business.

“There are gatekeepers at the front of all of this, not allowing us to export our products. We have to jump through loop after loop”, Sehgal explains.

The goal for both is to create positive awareness around sustainability. The two believe that hemp is the perfect catalyst and want to create partnerships across the globe with their products. Yet this can not be achieved by being banned by tech companies.

‘We can not legally target our ads for CBD products to other countries through Facebook, Google, or Amazon marketplaces’, Sehgal explains.

A PR representative from Facebook responded with the following:

‘We don’t allow topical and ingestible products containing CBD, and we don’t allow ingestible hemp products; however, we do allow topical hemp and items made of hemp that you cannot consume.’

Marketing hemp or CBD products through food can prove to be vital for growing a business further and these entrepreneurs recognize the opportunity. But Sehgal recognizes that there will always be pushback with legislation.

‘ So, investors will refrain from believing in our business. But, this industry can take off in the next 10 years.’

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Thesis Portfolio Submission #3:

Abstract:

This particular story was published in the San Francisco Chronicle during my time as a Food & Wine Reporter. Our team noticed a new trend that pointed to sake becoming the new drink of choice at modern, trendy restaurants, and people are loving it. But, what I wanted to get across is how sake got to this point to even be even considered an “it” drink. What follows is a historical piece about where the drink originated from, and how it migrated to the United States.

Then, the fun begins. There are descriptions for the different variations of the drink along with the specifics on how to actually drink Japanese sake. Throughout the piece are sources who provide their own testimonies as to why Japanese sake needs to be taken seriously as an emerging drink of choice for consumers.

Source List:

1. Jenny Eagleton- Beverage Director at Daytrip,
2. Eduardo Dingler- Vice President of Wine at Wine Access
3. Angel Davis- Owner of Millay, San Francisco-based wine shop
4. Jake Myrick- Co-Founder of Sequoia Sake

Link to story: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/food/wine/article/japanese-sake-bay-area-17401494.php>

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Japanese sake is becoming the ‘it’ drink at the Bay Area’s trendiest restaurants.

All signs are pointing to a sake boom. As the Japanese drink becomes easier to find, Bay Area beverage directors, sommeliers and other industry experts are promoting it to a wider audience.

For a long time, sake in the U.S. was mostly confined to Japanese restaurants, and most of what was served was cheap, mass-produced “hot sake.” But now, higher-quality versions are emerging, and the alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice is becoming extremely popular in non-Japanese restaurants like Oakland’s Daytrip and wine shops like Oakland Yard, as drinkers are discovering its complex flavors, aromas and versatile food-pairing potential.

In fact, sake is practically becoming mandatory at newer, trendier restaurants. “Any ambitious beverage program that’s focusing especially on fermented beverages, if it’s not including sake, then it feels sort of lazy to me,” said Jenny Eagleton, beverage director at Daytrip.

Rice-based alcohol traditions are thousands of years old, and even modern sake production dates back generations, with some commercial sake breweries opening in Japan as early as the 14th century. But for much of the 20th century, the main type of sake exported to the U.S. was the divisive “hot sake” that “garnered a bad stigma due to its poor production,” according to Eduardo Dingler, vice president of Wine at Wine Access. These warmed-up sakes — as hot as 212 degrees — are usually pasteurized, and the temperature can mask bitter flavors. The popularity of hot sake “sacrificed the quality of sake,” according to Angel Davis, owner of the San Francisco wine shop Millay.

Now, unpasteurized sake, or Nama, is fueling a renaissance. This version of sake needs to be refrigerated to preserve its delicate aroma and is always served cool. As more Nama is being imported into the U.S., wine shops, such as Millay, are starting to see an uptick in sake sales.

“I’m noticing that my sake pours are selling more than some of my wine pours,” said Davis. “I think there is a new interest in sake because of young people wanting to try new things and discover something else besides wine.”

Sales of sake in the U.S. grew 5.3% by volume in 2021, according to analyst IWSR, and by more than 7% during the last five years. They’re projected to grow by 2.4% annually through 2026.

Sake has felt inaccessible to many U.S. drinkers for a long time, in part because of the many misconceptions about its production process and the complicated nature of its sub-categories. There may also be a language barrier as non-Japanese-speaking customers try to understand the difference between styles such as Junmai, Nigori and Daiginjo on bottle labels.

But as more Bay Area drinkers become curious about the processes behind fermented beverages like wine, they’re also becoming more curious about sake. While the production of sake is similar to that of wine, its fermentation process is much more complicated. The process includes water, yeast, rice and koji, a fungus that is also present in products like soy sauce and miso.

“Because Americans have this relationship with hot sake, a lot of people believe that sake is distilled,” said Jake Myrick, co-founder of Sequoia Sake, the first sake brewery in San Francisco. Actually, he explained, it’s fermented.

Specifically, the sake fermentation process is called parallel fermentation. Two things are happening at once: Starch (rice) is being converted into sugar, and sugar is being converted into alcohol. The koji mold contains enzymes that convert the rice into fermentable sugars.

Koji helps provide sake with its distinctive flavor. “Sake begins and ends with koji because it provides the magic that this drink displays,” said Dingler.

While the fermentation is unique, the sensory appreciation of enjoying a glass of sake is similar to that of wine. Young, unaged sake, which ranges anywhere from a few months to a couple of years, exhibits a clear color and fresh flavors. But when it's aged for a few years, it may take on a butterscotch color, similar to the way an aged red wine begins to look browner. And generally, the darker the color, the more savory the sake tastes.

For those who are unfamiliar with sake, it's best to start with Junmai, which showcases the pure flavors of the rice, or Ginjo, another light, floral style.

Many sakes can last much longer than most wines once they're open. After cracking a bottle of sake, you can keep it up to one or two weeks as it is less sensitive than wine to oxidation, according to Dinger. Consider storing your sake bottle as if you were storing white wine, in a dark place with a regulated cool temperature.

Part of its new popularity may be due to the fact that sake is in fact lower in alcohol content than many spirits, generally in the 12%-20% range. That makes it an appealing alternative to cocktails for those trying to reduce their alcohol consumption. Notably, many restaurants like Daytrip are now serving sake in a wine glass, as opposed to the carafes and small, shot-glass-size cups that are traditional. That glassware helps it appeal to wine drinkers, according to Dinger.

But what really excites beverage industry experts are the food pairings that go with sake. The possibilities are endless, since the flavors of sake can range from savory to creamy to acidic. Most importantly, it has very little to no tannin, which makes it harmonious with lighter fare like fish or vegetables that red wines could overpower.

These days, sake is being served not only with Japanese food, but also with Mexican, Italian and French. Or with the unusually savory, flavor-packed cuisine at a restaurant like Daytrip.

"We describe ourselves as a fermented-driven restaurant and our food reflects this," said Eagleton. Sake is a natural match for the menu. "We always have a miso butter pasta that is on the menu that pairs very well with our sake because of the koji that is present in both the sake and miso."

Even industry experts like Davis, of Millay, can be shocked by sake's food pairing potential.

"I was with a group of people for a tasting," she said. "They started with grazing over a cheese board, ate some blue cheese. And then it turned into a chocolate tasting. And I was like, wait... what the hell is going on? This is insane."