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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Exploring the Effects of Identity Markers and Meditation Selection: Affinity Voice

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Acting

by

Arizsia Staton

Thesis Committee:

Professor Cynthia Bassham, Chair
Professor Phil Thompson
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2022

DEDICATION

To

The silenced

and their descendants in search of healing

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: Information on Vocal Bias	4
CHAPTER 2: Structure of Leading Meditation Apps	6
CHAPTER 3: Affinity Voice Intent and Methods	9
Phase 1: The Current Phase- Intent and Methods	9
Phase 2: Next Steps	10
Phase 3: Final Development	11
CHAPTER 4: Findings and Conclusion	12
WORKS CITED	14

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Exploring the Effects of Identity Markers and Meditation Selection: Affinity Voice

by

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Master of Arts in Acting

University of California, Irvine, 2022

Cynthia Bassham, Chair

Many online platforms that offer guided meditations are solely categorized by the genre of the listening experience. Due to the nature of the goals of meditation and being cognizant of meeting the needs of marginalized communities in the United States, there was a spike in the development of meditation guides and apps created for the use of specific racial and ethnic marginalized communities.

When humans receive vocal auditory stimulation, the brain begins to categorize sound, and verbal cues, and develop perception. These cues allow for the perception of vocal quality, gender, and ethnic, racial, or cultural background of the voice(s) we hear, i.e., identity markers. Perception allows for bias, and bias can have a negative or positive association. Negative associations, particularly those associated with trauma, can interfere with achieving a meditative state.

Therefore, I chose to investigate whether the listener of a meditation guide preferred a voice-over artist whose identity markers aligned with theirs, and or if the listener had identity marker biases. I created an online platform, Affinity Voice (affinityvoice.com), that gives listeners the ability to select a voice-over artist for their

meditation guide from a menu categorized by the following identity markers: gender, race or ethnicity, regionality, language inclusion, and sexual orientation.

Listeners were provided with a selection of 10 voice-over artists (4 male, 6 female) varying in all the above identity markers. Using the meditation guide text as a control, each voice-over artist read from the same text, and included subtle language shifts, language inclusion other than English, and or vernacular that aligns with their identity markers.

There were 26 listeners who participated in the pre- and post-survey allowing for a coagulation of questionnaires that included the listener's personal identity markers, and if they had the following voice-over guide identity marker preferences: gender, race or culture, and regionality. Of the 26, 12 listeners, 46%, were Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC).

Listeners showed a prevalent gender preference of female voices at 44.4%. In terms of achieving a state of relaxation, 34% of participants had a cultural or racial preference, and 25% had a regional preference. Of the members who identified within the BIPOC community, 58% had a gender preference, 58% had a cultural or racial preference, and 25% had a regionality preference.

INTRODUCTION

In this modern day, creating access to guided mindful meditation has become a booming industry. Accompanying this, there has been a wave in research and studies within the last decade regarding the effectiveness of meditation. There are many control variables to account for in these studies to relate the correlation of the results to meditation, such as: diet, sleep, lifestyle, and consistency of the practice. When these variables are monitored and undergo little to no change, the evidence suggests meditation can reduce anxiety, depression, insomnia, high blood pressure, and improve attention, and conflict resolution efficacy (NCCIH) (The Neuroscience of Mindful Meditation).

From 2015 to 2019, globally, consumer spending on meditation apps gradually increased by 52%. In the year 2020 between March and April, notably during civil unrest in the United States in tandem with the COVID-19 global health pandemic, the top English-language based mental wellness apps spiked by 31% compared to January 2020 (“Downloads of Top English-Language Mental Wellness Apps”). During this time, there was also a development of meditation guides and apps created by and for the use of Black, Indigenous, or person of color (BIPOC), and specific racial and ethnic marginalized groups of people within the BIPOC community.

Meditation is generally defined as “profound and extended contemplation or reflection in order to achieve focused attention or an otherwise altered state of consciousness and to gain spiritual insight into oneself and the world. Traditionally associated with spiritual and religious exercises, meditation is now also used to provide relaxation and relief from stress” (APA). There are different types of meditation varying in

approach. For this project and study, like the popularized US-language based meditation apps, I used the mindfulness meditation approach; “a type of meditation in which a person focuses attention on their breathing, thoughts, feelings, and sensations are experienced freely as they arise. Mindfulness meditation is intended to enable individuals to become highly attentive to sensory information and to focus on each moment as it occurs” (APA). From these definitions I deduce that an individual practicing a guided mindful meditation must be able to reach a state of consciousness that allows for release, and relaxation to assist the listener in reaching optimal results: reduced stress and anxiety, and increased awareness of oneself.

When humans receive auditory stimulation, our brains begin to categorize the sound based on the auditory cues we pick up to identify the sound. This includes auditory cues from voices that inform us of the vocal quality, gender, and ethnic, racial, or cultural background of the voice we hear. The research in studying how the intake of these cues affect a meditation guide listener’s bias and perception has been predominantly focused on gender. There are many factors that influence those biases and perceptions, but factors that have been left out of that conversation are kinship, and trauma, which can both lead to positive or negative associations that influence bias. The listener shares an intimate experience with the voice they choose to hear. The voice-over (VO) artist guides the meditator into a state of mind that leads to release of tension, and alteration of breath pattern, which requires trust. So, if a meditation guide listener is presented with a voice guide that sparks a negative association, it could be a hindrance to achieving optimal results of mindful meditation. Currently the listening experiences available on meditation apps only allow selection from genres focused on potential stressors, topics, and goals. (i.e.,

affirmations, gratitude, anxiety, mindfulness, presence, stress, etc.). The relationship between mindful meditation voice guide offers and kinship, or likeness, can be highlighted through identity markers. Identity markers are shared characteristics that hold meaning informed by the society in which one exists.

With the knowledge that our brains categorize voices and develop bias based on that, and that guided meditation listeners may have varying responses based on positive or negative association, I decided to study the following: if identity marker preferences were present due to giving the mediator the option to select the identity markers of the voice over artist they chose, and if the listener has identity marker biases in efforts of reaching optimal mindful meditation results of reduced stress.

CHAPTER 1: Information on Vocal Bias

Much of the research conducted on vocal bias has been focused on gender. Gender is in reference to socially constructed characteristics of a man or woman, not to be confused with the sex. Sex is the distinction between male or female as based on reproductive organs. The information found in both research studies provided below, interchangeably use sex and gender, inferring gender from sex. However, the notable manipulated variable for gender perception in the two studies are related to voice pitch.

There are two approaches in research I looked into: neural and qualitative data preference. Vocal cues for gender discrimination include voice pitch height, and other spectral and temporal characteristics. A study conducted in 2014, Discrimination of Voice Gender in the Human Auditory Cortex, observed the neural imagery of the auditory cortex of 24 test subjects in response to listening to female voices and male voices. The methods for the voice recordings used in this study included evoking responses using unaltered “gender apparent” male and female voice recordings that had a natural pitch and spectral shape, followed by altered audios adjusted to a median point of 160 Hz. The purpose of creating a median point served a control due to evidence that manipulating vocal audio to 160 Hz neutralizes pitch height, and therefore subjects could not differentiate male from female. They found that no auditory regions were more or less activated by male or female voices. However, in a non-primary auditory cortex, female voices consistently evoked more activation than male voices. It was concluded that difference in activation cannot be exclusively explained by pitch height and is not solely due to psychological attribution of

gender. This strong evidence supports the theory that the mechanisms for voice gender bias is a “non-primary auditory cortex gender-dependent activation level cue.”

In the sparse information available regarding gender bias and its relationship to meditation practices, is a study conducted in 1981 that surveyed 76 undergraduate student’s (40 male and 36 female) responses to autogenic training in a choice of male or female voices. Autogenic training is a relaxation technique intended to “produce a relaxed feeling of physical warmth and heaviness to foster a state of physical and emotional calmness.” 52% preferred female voices. There was also a significant voice gender preference in association with the sex of the subject; most males preferred female voices, and most females preferred male voices.

Unfortunately, there is little to no research on the mechanisms of gender bias outside of the brain’s auditory cortex, and there is no research available on identity marker preferences, biases, and effects in meditation guide voices, or otherwise. This is a grave disservice to users of guided meditation, particularly those who identify within the BIPOC community, and marginalized communities. Since the inception of the United States there have been social, political, and economic frameworks that directly affect the safety, and quality of life of any groups of people who do not visually identify within the European diaspora. In the United States, this eurocentrism also confers privilege to those who identity as English (1st language) speakers, heterosexual, and cis-gender people. These effects are generational and remain prevalent, and notably lead to trauma. All the above affect the mental and physical wellbeing of an individual. The purpose of mindful meditation is to improve one’s mental health and physical well-being. However, if the biases that are assessed by a meditation guide listener per the intake of verbal cues induce

a negative and or trauma related response, that causes a hindrance to achieving optimal goals of practicing meditation. It is pertinent that BIPOC people, and marginalized communities see themselves represented in a wellness space, i.e., a meditation app. Therefore, identity marker preferences, and effects in meditation guide voices in relationship to the listener is a necessary, and worthy topic to research and explore, especially as the guided meditation app industry continues to grow.

CHAPTER 2: Structure of Leading Meditation Apps

Ranked by the number of downloads and consumer spending, the leading meditation apps from 2019 to 2021 are as follows: Calm, Headspace, and Meditopia. There is little to no accessible detailed data reported on the use of the top meditation apps that were created by and for the BIPOC community. However, according to major news outlets such as New York Magazine, and the top results on Google Play for “BIPOC meditation apps,” there are two apps consistently mentioned, Liberate and Shine.

Calm, Headspace, and Meditopia are all leading apps in mindful meditation that has a non-religious approach focused on stress reduction. All three apps offer more than mindful meditation, such as: soundscapes, stories, and guided exercises. However, I am focusing on the meditation offers. They all are generally categorized by potential stressors, topics, and goals with additions that are niche to each app. Calm offers over 15 categories of mindful meditation experiences categorized by genre, and potential stressors. These categories include sleep, anxiety, beginners, stress, work, self-care, with soundscape, relationships, and more. Headspace’s support center states that it uses “calming and insight” meditation techniques. Headspace offers 10 categories of guided meditations categorized by time, topic, and experience level. These categories include beginning meditation, pride (LGBTQIA+ centered), nature soundscapes, affirmations, and timed meditations. Meditopia offers a selection of 14 meditations categories categorized by potential stressors, and topics with an emphasis on experience level in comparison to its two counterparts. These categories include, learning how to meditate, stress, starting your day, positivity, relationships, and emotional management.

Liberate and Shine also offer mindful meditation categories that are informed by potential life stressors, but they have impactful additions to their offers to meet the needs of the BIPOC communities they serve. Liberate was created for the use of Black and African American people. So, its additional meditation offerings include specialized meditation categories and talks for that community, such as connection to ancestors, race, and microaggressions. It also offers a more spiritual approach than its leading counterparts with the additional categories of chants, and faith. Shine was created for the BIPOC community at large. Like some of its leading counterparts, Shine offers an intake survey to individualize a listening experience. Within that survey users have the option to include “playlists” that are focused on the Asian/Pacific Islander (API), LGBTQIA+, Native American, and Black experience. Shine offers meditation categories in the form of themed playlists that have more detailed mindful meditation guides within them. Specialized categories centered in Shine’s mission to serve the BIPOC community include resilience and identity.

Each meditation app has found a way to specialize the app’s listening experience in alignment with the goals they have outlined regarding their approach and technique, especially Shine and Liberate. Other than the intake survey offered by shine, none of the other apps offered the specific approach of including a voice guide selection process specific to gender, regionality, and culture as it relates to race and ethnicity for multiple identities in one app.

CHAPTER 3: Affinity Voice Intent and Methods

The meditation app industry is growing exponentially in the United States. Meeting the needs of the BIPOC community and marginalized communities in this industry can be largely confronted by further research into a meditation guide listener's identity marker biases and preferences in the VO artist. This can also benefit populations outside BIPOC and other marginalized groups.

In striving toward meeting this need I created Affinity Voice; an online platform that is the first storytelling and meditative listening experience of its kind. It is created and designed to offer a listening experience categorized by 'identity', available to anyone, and everybody. The listener shares an intimate experience with the voice they choose to hear. So, why not explore the possibilities of experiencing the positive results of meditation, ease, groundedness, and the joys of storytelling through finding an affinity, or kinship with the voice a listener gets to hear? Identity encapsulates a multitude of labels and meanings that are ever expanding; and that has a particular resonance for people making sense of their identity in this modern world. Affinity Voice is for that; and celebrates the positive effects that can come from choosing voices that bring us peace. Affinity comfortably leans into the identity markers that have the potential to provide the most opportunity for auditory cues and signals for listeners.

For the purposes of continuing to garner support to accurately collect data, obtain more audio samples to expand the variety within offered identity marker selection, and grow this platform, the project of Affinity Voice is divided into three phases.

Phase 1: The Current Phase- Intent and Methods

Affinity is currently in its earliest stage as a seed project and serving as the practical study for this thesis project. For this phase I presented listeners with the opportunity to listen to one mindful meditation presence body scan from a selection of 10 voices sourced from American voice-over (VO) artists varying in multiple categories of identity: gender, race, ethnicity, dialect, age, first language, educational background, socio-economic background, and regionality. The VO artists also had the option of including their sexual orientation for the purposes of transparent representation.

The text used serves as a control as the only meditation offer. Each VO artist individualized the text from the presence body scan to include subtle language shifts, and or vernacular that aligns with the identity of the VO artist. These shifts were initiated by the VO artist, and closely monitored during the recording process to maintain the original intent behind the language to ensure consistency in all audio recordings, and alignment with the goals of mindful meditation while highlighting the VO artist's identity markers through 'apparent' verbal cues.

Listeners were given the ability to select a VO artist for their meditation guide from a menu categorized by the following identity markers: gender, race or ethnicity, regionality, language inclusion, and sexual orientation. There was a required pre- and post-listening experience questionnaire that surveyed the listeners own personal identity markers, and stress level before and after the listening experience.

Phase 2: Next Steps

After collecting responses from our users in phase one, Affinity will utilize its findings to continue research with higher control variables, and a larger participant pool. Secondly, Affinity will be including more voices that vary in identity markers, and language to widen listener options, and advance selection functions will accommodate these additions. Also, I plan to expand the categories of listening experiences (meditation exercises, affirmations, short stories etc.).

Phase 3: Final Development

This phase will be Affinity Voice fully realized! This includes the convenient implementation of Affinity Voice as an app, fully designed by putting our user's needs first, expanding to meet a vast array of needs, and utilizing the findings from ongoing research to inform the mindful meditation selection process.

CHAPTER 4: Findings and Conclusion

There was a total of 26 listeners who participated in the pre- and post-survey, 17 females, 8 males, and 1 non-binary person. Listeners were randomly sourced by way of invitation to participate via social media (Facebook, and Instagram), and via email to the University of California, Irvine student body. Of the 26 participants 46% self-identified within the BIPOC community, and the remainder self-identified as white.

In the pre-survey, listener's personal identity markers were collected: gender identity, cultural and or racial identity, and regionality. Listeners were given the choice to select male, female, non-binary, or two-spirit for gender. The selection could have included intersex for further inclusion. Listeners were allowed to manually input their culture and or race to allow for specificity in the data.

After the listening experience 51.9% of individuals reported a significant decrease in stress. 46.2% of listeners completed the mindful meditation without music, and 53.3% completed it with music. 25.9% of individuals preferred guided meditation with music, 22.2% without, and 51.9% had no preference. The majority of the listeners did not have a gender preference at 51.9%. However, there was a prevalent preference to female voices at 44.4%, while preference to male voices was 1%. In terms of achieving a state of relaxation, 34% of participants had a cultural or racial preference, and 25% had a regional preference.

Of the members who identified within the BIPOC community, 58% had a gender preference, 58% had a cultural or racial preference, and 25% had a regionality preference for the identity markers of the VO artist they chose to listen to.

There was also an opportunity to leave additional comments. Within the comments there was a theme of expressing gratitude for including BIPOC voices, and bi-lingual language inclusion.

I look forward to further exploration into this research with a larger number of controls, more randomized participant pools, and implementation calculating statistical significance to build on this research.

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