

THE DEFINITIVE
YOUTH
MAGAZINE

SHOUT

DHAKA THURSDAY AUGUST 6, 2020, SRABAN 22, 1427 BS

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ROMANCING AN
IDEAL TOXIC

PG 4

STUCK IN
TIME
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HOW

MUCH

CONTENT

IS

TOO

MUCH?

EDITORIAL

Log into Facebook, you have infinite scrolling. On your Netflix home screen, endless things to watch. Choose music on Spotify, there's too many on shuffle. Where, if at all, does it end?

When it comes to entertainment value, nobody will be upset over the uncountable options of TV shows and movies that we get to watch on multiple platforms. Back in the day, however, there were a handful of channels producing dramas and shows that the entire family could enjoy together. You remember *Ityadi*, right?

And today people have their individual Netflix subscriptions; password-protected and all. We are being spoon, nay, ladle-fed with episodes--at times of two very similar shows. There's guilt at work when you miss out on a show that everyone's talking about on their newsfeeds. And speaking of news, there are more news channels than actual news.

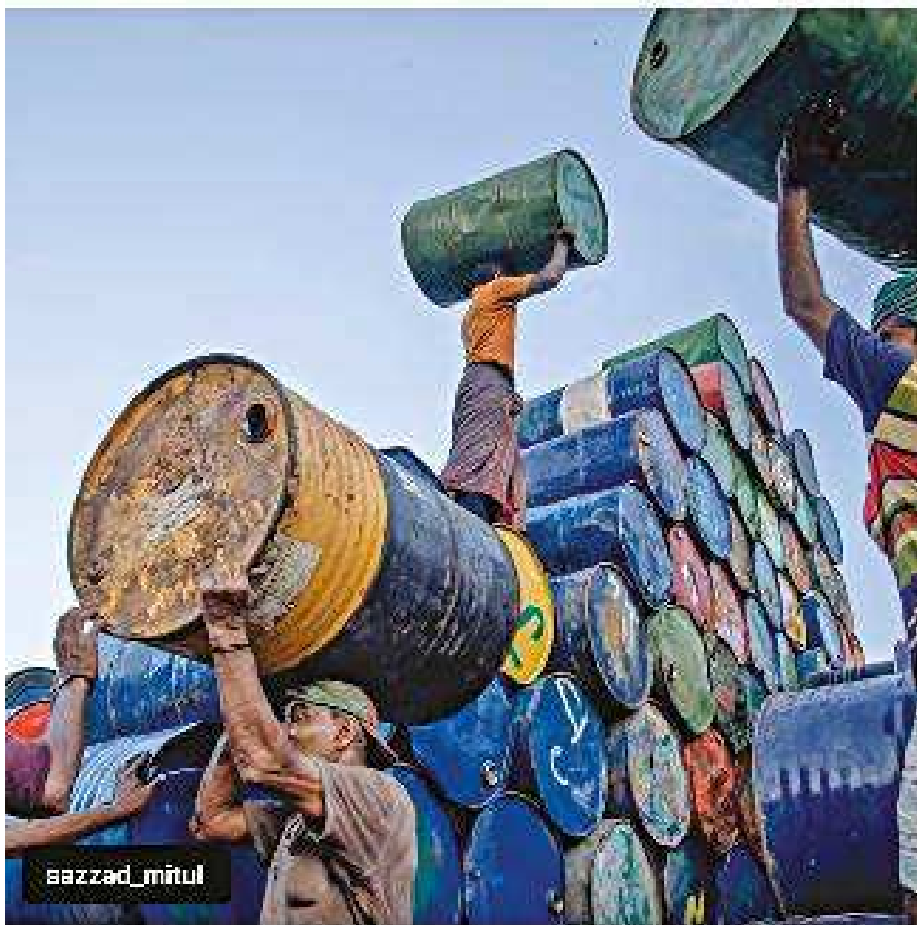
Press that big red button on your remote control. Log out. Live a life that isn't made out of pixels.

-- Kazi Akib Bin Asad, In-charge, SHOUT



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PLAYWATCH

GAMING



New Kid in Town

H. RAINAK KHAN REAL

Valorant marks Riot Games' debut in the world of FPS, a genre already dominated by the heavyweights *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, *Overwatch* and *Fortnite*.

While many mocked the entry of *Valorant* in the competitive-shooting scene, calling it names like copycat, rip-off or the biggest game development failure by a vast and reputed studio, *Valorant* is undeniably a success, is way more than a copycat and definitely has the potential to offer much more. It's true the game drew its inspirations from *CS:GO* and *Overwatch*; many would even argue that the character designs are *Overwatch*-styled. However, *Valorant* is thriving because of its exciting gameplay, precision gunplay and the unique abilities of the characters which can be tough to both control or handle if you aren't familiar enough.

Right now, *Valorant* offers three different modes of gameplay: Unrated, Competitive and Spike Rush. In the Unrated mode, the first team to win 13 rounds wins the match, whereas in the Spike Rush mode, it is the team winning 4 rounds. The competitive mode is unlocked after the completion of 20 Unrated matches. Once unlocked, based on your performance, you will find yourself progressing through the ranking system in this mode through the completion of placement matches.

The fast paced 5 vs 5 gameplay within four different maps involves two teams: the attacking team and the defending team. The attacking team plants the spike at the designated sites and defends the spike from being defused, while the defending team tries to eliminate the

attacking team or defuse the spike, all within a short, fixed time interval. The sides are switched around halfway during a match. There is a buying phase before the start of each round when the players can buy shields, ability charges and their weapon of choice from the 17 guns available, using the credits they are allotted according to their performance in the previous rounds.

There are 11 agents to choose from, each having unique abilities, distinct personalities and character designs. However, no matter who you choose, winning isn't possible with the abilities of the agents alone. Rather, it requires accurate aiming, good in-game reflexes and tactics. Getting used to the specific recoil patterns of every gun is a must for handling guns efficiently and through this, *Valorant* yet again manages to bring out the best of competitive shooting with its calculated game dynamics.

Having spent the past three weeks playing *Valorant*, I must say I loved the thrill it offers, especially because even the underdog can end up winning the match. Switching between Jett, Viper and Reyna, I personally found Reyna to be most convenient because of her ability to regenerate her health by absorbing the souls of the players she killed.

Riot Games has done a great job in developing a light-weight, fast paced and most importantly, a completely free to play game. If you love the FPS genre, then *Valorant* is a must try.

If only H. Rainak Khan Real was as fast as Jett, his life would've been much easier. Wish him luck at rainakkhanreal@gmail.com

The Major Guide to University Majors

This is what it looks like to judgemental acquaintances

RASHA JAMEEL

DISCLAIMER: Please note that the guide given below takes into account the lack of subject diversity in Bangladeshi universities (take it up with the education board, don't come for me please) and thus only includes the most popular subject choices for university. Cheers!

Behold,

A concise and highly-exclusive guide to understanding how your self worth is directly proportional to the market value of your university major of choice, because that random uncle at a family event said so.

BUSINESS STUDENTS

Always be wary of science students, comparing their majors to yours for no reason is one of their favourite hobbies.

Finance and Accounting: Understand that most people will only acknowledge the "BBA" you add before introducing the major. You are most likely to be considered smart and ambitious.

Marketing and International Business: The "BBA" before the major will once again stand out like an Oreo in a sea of *toast biskoot*. You will however face questions like "So this is international law or what?"

Management: You don't need me to tell you that the "BBA" will once again be acknowledged first. However, further description of your major such as "HR Management" might earn you the tag of "basic".

SCIENCE STUDENTS

Steer clear of commerce students, you will

always feel underdressed if not undermined.

Engineering: If university majors could collectively be considered the equivalent of well-cooked *kacchi biriyani*, in our South Asian subcontinent, this is the gem: the proverbial *kacchi er aloo*. You will be hailed as a hard worker, unless you're a woman, because then you'll just be headstrong. Majors such as CSE however, might be met with indifference.

Architecture: It doesn't matter how hard you try to explain your major, all everyone might understand is "interior

ma in terms of major.

Medicine: You'll be expected to not have a life whatsoever, and might end up being considered as the biggest nerd in the room.

Life Sciences: The second cousin of "didn't get into med school", you'll be met with a lot of disapproval, most of which will be centered around the supposed lack of jobs for majors such as Biochemistry, Microbiology, etc.

ARTS AND HUMANITIES STUDENTS Remember to avoid crossing paths with students in science and students in com-

won't be fully recognised and confused people will end up dismissing you as carefree.

Social Sciences: Economics might get you a lot of wows but the same can't be said about Political Science, International Relations, Psychology, etc.

Law: If you're a woman, you're in "the wrong subject for women in this country" and if you're a man, you'll be assumed to have a lot of "political clout".

So, to quickly recap, FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS.

You must understand that the people



designer". But you'll be considered brave for taking on such a difficult major, unless you're a woman because architecture is apparently "not a woman's field".

Pharmaceutical Sciences: The first cousin of "didn't get into med school", you will be addressed henceforth as the "future medicine counter assistant".

Environmental Studies: This branch of science is rather obscure to most people still, you just might end up being an enig-

merce, they consider you their punching bag.

Literature: Welcome to the world of tags such as "teacher-like attitude" and "un-ambitious". Baseless judgement will never not fail to completely unacknowledge the developmental potential of your major.

Media and Communications: Congratulations, in the eyes of condescending people, your major of choice is essentially the *elachi* in biriyani. Your major's appeal

passing all these judgments have nothing constructive to say and ultimately have nothing to do with your life. Stay calm, clear your mind of doubts. May the winds of fortune bless the path you choose to embark upon.

Rasha Jameel is an overzealous Ravenclaw who often draws inspiration from mundane things such as memes. Send her your memespирational thoughts at rasha.jameel@outlook.com

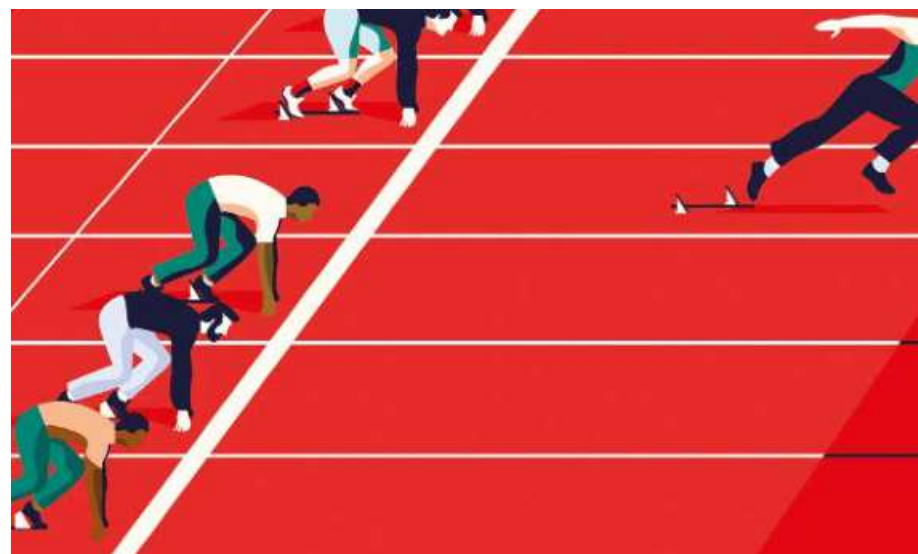
THE MERITOCRACY PARADOX

SHAROSE ISLAM

In an ideal world, political and economic power would be conferred upon the most meritorious and talented. A world where wealth, connections, and social class would be irrelevant. Such a world would be following a meritocratic economic system. Whilst countries like the USA like to claim that they are, in fact, meritocratic, meritocracy leaves no room for nepotism or corruption. But that's not what we are here to talk about today.

To the short-sighted, the idea of meritocracy sounds perfect. However, that is far from the truth. A truly meritocratic system is a paradox in itself because it states nothing about the determinants of what "merit" really is. What it doesn't take into consideration is that "merit" is subjective. A painter may be meritorious in their art, but because most people cannot grasp the depth of the work, they may not be considered meritorious and thus, may never "succeed".

Another facet that remains undefined in the theory of meritocracy is "success". Is success money or fame? Or is it social status? Let us assume that "success" is knowledge. But knowledge comes at a



cost. To be successfully knowledgeable, you would have to attain education from a well-reputed university. Going to university is expensive and only so many people can afford to do so. Say, you get a scholarship, and you work long and hard, and become "meritorious". Now you want the same for your child, so you work long and hard to earn enough so they can focus entirely on

their education and then go on to repeat the same cycle. It all ultimately boils down to money and power, the two determinants that are supposed to be non-prevalent in a meritocratic society.

The most significant loophole in this theory is its contradictory system of reward. In a meritocratic society, individuals are rewarded based on how successful

they are; which ultimately makes their reward, in simple words, a conflict of interest that ends up debunking the entire theory as a sham. If the theory were to be remotely applicable to the real world, individuals would have been rewarded based on their effort. There would be no "geniuses" because everyone would be on the same scale as long as they were making the effort to be so.

The point of this argument is that "merit" is irrelevant. It is not objective. In fact, basing success on anything but objectivity would create scope for favouritism, nepotism, and classism. Would you rather work hard or work smart? Is effort necessary when you are genetically more intelligent than your colleagues? The paradox lies in the fact that even the people at the top preaching meritocracy do not realise that they are, in fact, lucky as they are already "there", while others are still making it.

Sharose Islam is currently seeking rehabilitation in order to recover from her near lethal over dosage of Milo. In order to set up an MAA meeting, reach out at: [facebook.com/sharose.islam](https://www.facebook.com/sharose.islam)

ROMANCING AN IDEAL **TOXIC**

ROSHNI SHAMIM

When it comes to the word 'toxic', almost every single person on the planet automatically shrinks away from the term. Quite an intriguing reaction from human beings, given that the majority who react to it have often not actually experienced any toxicity in a relationship. What takes place here instead is the instinctive reaction triggered from the fear of the unknown. In an age

and time that emphasises, embodies and to a large extent, even romanticises "red flags" in a relationship, it creates an inherent and rigid fear within the human mind.

Ideally, this fear should perhaps be a blessing in disguise. After all, if this stemming fear is stopping you from butchering your self-respect in a relationship and essentially helping you avoid a traumatic experience, then there is naturally no harm in goading the fear. Unfortunately for our

innocent minds, this is often the wrong path to take. As it so happens, the fear stays but so does our silent curiosity. Despite our best efforts to spot the red flags that lead to toxicity, our eyes, mind and invariably even our hearts tend to glaze over all the warning signs.

If you believe that the reason why human beings tend to endure toxic relationships is simply because of being in love, think again. Avoidance of clear warning

signs in a relationship are often stemmed from a bigger root cause. Interestingly, trauma plays a crucial role in shaping your emerging thoughts and behavioral aspects as an adult. Your subconscious thus somehow buries your childhood trauma deep within the confines of our mind, which eventually projects itself later in your adult relationships. In the case of having an abusive parent in your childhood, your guttural instinct cautions you to stay away from pursuing any person with a remotely similar set of characteristics. The irony is that inevitably, the marked off person is exactly the one you end up falling for.

This is not a coincidence in most cases. You convince your mind that you will stay away from such obvious toxic characteristics, having faced the outcomes personally. Yet in the face of reality, it is that inexplicable familiarity that arises from that characteristic that makes you crave that relationship anyway. Often, this is a sidelined and subconscious attempt to hurt your abusive parent by making them witness the exact torture inflicted on yourself, as they have done on your other parent for years; it therefore becomes an endless loop of endless mental torture.

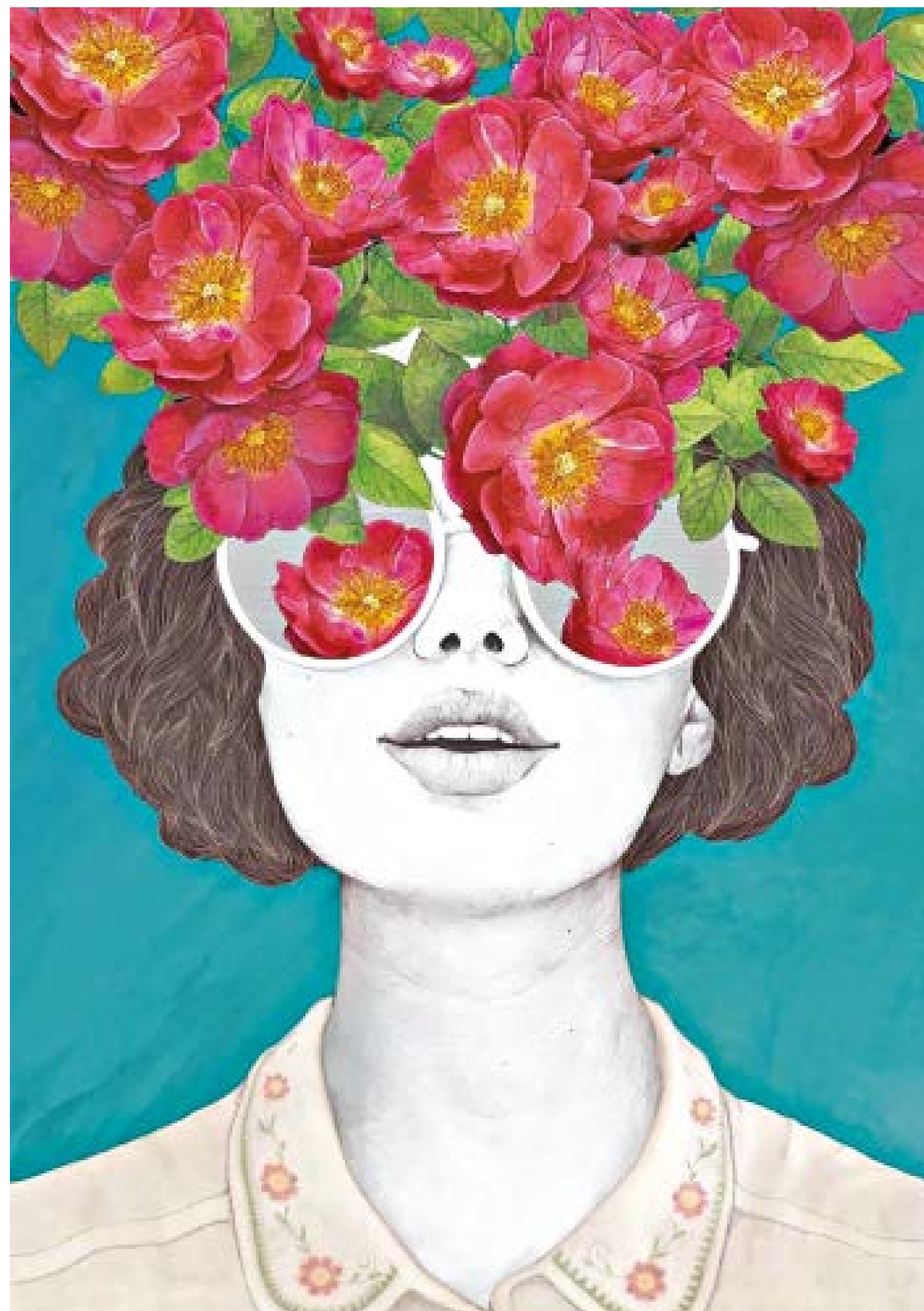
This is not to say that every toxic relationship dependency is stemmed from childhood trauma. It may also arise due to other kinds of suppressed trauma, that thus lead you to bury yourself instead in the open-ended toxic relationship than in dealing with your inner demons.

In your mind, it just seems like an easier escape to add another pile of trauma to the already growing pile inside of you.

A simple question now comes to mind: *what about the people that hold no past trauma whatsoever, yet somehow get tangled in a toxic relationship and refuse to leave it despite the mental unrest?* A key factor to incorporate here—as well as to always remember—is the power of human emotions. Both a blessing and in certain cases a curse, our grasp of emotions often delude our own hearts into thinking this is acceptable. Have you ever felt like your partner treats you like garbage, yet you conveniently forget all about it when the sun is shining bright on your relationship once again? This pattern is you clinging to your inherent hunger for positivity, thereby erasing the earlier wrongful treatment from your mind. By clinging to the sweet memories of your partner, whose version in your head differs starkly from the person in front of you, you begin to reason more and more on the matter through your memory version than the real life one.

It suffices to say that if someone is hoping to find a clear cut solution here on escaping their toxic relationships easily, then the truth is—there isn't one. There is no easy "hack" on escaping that dependency you have built inside your head, over and over. The first step here though might just be your acknowledgment as well as eventual acceptance. Is there trauma that you have buried, a past that you are running away from by choosing to rather accept abuse in your present? Perhaps just a little shred of acceptance can actually help you not only cringe at the term "toxic" but also turn away from it, bit by bit.

Roshni strongly believes that the study of human behavior holds the answer(s) to all our internal issues. Mail her unusual facts on human psychology at roshni.shamim@gmail.com



HOW MUCH CONTENT IS TOO MUCH?

ADHORA AHMED

Imagine this: it's been a long, stressful day of working from home or doing classes. Now that you have some time to yourself, you cuddle up in front of the TV or your laptop. You look for something to unwind to on Netflix. However, none of the movies or series seem appealing. You aren't in the mood for something new, neither are you willing to rewatch an old favourite. You end up scrolling through the app for an hour, only to close it in frustration.

It's not like you couldn't find anything to watch; there's just too many of it.

When the lockdown was imposed in order to curb the spread of Covid-19, people were urged to stay home except for essential purposes. While this new normal significantly hampers the regular flow of life for many, it has brought a few blessings in disguise for those with decent internet access. Since the 24/7 news outlets are preoccupied with the negativity surrounding this crisis, we rely on streaming services for a much-needed escapism. This is demonstrated in a JP Morgan research where Netflix saw 15.8 million new subscriptions in the first quarter of 2020, surpassing their estimate of 8.8 million.

One might put the extra leisure time to use by ticking off items from their watchlist, but the satisfaction begins to wear off after a while. Watching a movie or series can evoke instant gratification, similar to whenever you eat a slice of pizza or buy a new set of clothes. Yet, a long session of binge-watching can have similar effects on your brain as wolfing down too much fast food has on your stomach—you feel bloated. There's also the issue of the infinity of content within your reach, making it easy

to get lost among the unlimited options. Eventually, the unchecked items on your watchlist feel like chores to do.

"Although I browse Netflix with a particular genre in mind, I tend to lose interest upon seeing the various options, which leads to indecision. After spending quite some time in deliberation, I end up picking a show which rarely meets my expectations," says Tasnim Islam Ina, undergraduate student of Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). "I also feel a lack of motivation soon after I think of watching something. At first, I'm pretty excited to explore, but as soon as I start looking for movies I lose interest."

According to American psychologist Barry Schwartz in his book *The Paradox of Choice – Why More Is Less*, an excess of choice can pose a daunting challenge to consumers. As a result, they tend to stay within their comfort zones instead of carefully choosing. The often subpar outcome may result in regret or anxiety over failing to select a better option. Schwartz may have been inspired from a research conducted by psychologists Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper in 2000, where consumers were asked to choose from a large and small array of flavours of jam. Although interest in the larger assortment was more likely, the consumers were more inclined to make a purchase from the smaller one.

The findings from the book and study can also be applied to how we view content. Overwhelmed by the seemingly endless options, it's no wonder we like to narrow them down, even at the expense of quality. These days, algorithms do the work of helping us stay within our comfort zones by detecting our preferences and providing curated content. On the other hand,

algorithms might discourage us to find out content on our own by telling us what they think we like, which is not always spot-on. Just because you put on a lo-fi music playlist while studying doesn't mean you'll always want to listen to similar kinds of music. The algorithms can also struggle to figure out what consumers with an eclectic taste would like to see. This, in turn, may be beneficial to those users as they would more likely be actively seeking out content to their unique preferences.

Anika Tabassum, 20, concurs, "I personally think it should be up to users to choose what they want to see. People have their own interests, and they are likely to choose shows and movies they think they will enjoy rather than whatever the algorithms give them. Then again, algorithms can help people find shows similar to their recent watch history."

Tasnim holds a different view, "The option of having a personalised list based on my watch history can help filter other things out, but after some point even the list seems boring. Hence, there's no enthusiasm in looking for shows."

This lack of motivation might eventually make one turn away from streaming platforms altogether, at least for a while. Wading through so many confusing options can make one feel emotionally exhausted, resulting in detachment from looking for entertainment. These feelings allude to common symptoms of burnout. Although there has been no conclusive study linking non-productive activities and burnout, the syndrome can affect anyone and is not limited to job holders.

While taking a break from watching movies can free up your mind, going days without entertainment while staying mostly

indoors may also be detrimental to your mental well-being. To solve this, you can try improving your choosing strategy. Nobel laureate economist Herbert A. Simon was known for his work on decision-making. He classified consumers into two groups: *maximisers* and *satisficers*. The former share similar traits to perfectionists; they want to know for certain that their choice is the best one available by considering all the other options, but it's impossible to sift through the millions of shows or songs in a streaming platform's library. On the contrary, the latter don't stress over the quality of what they have chosen, nor do they compromise their standards. They usually stick to the first choice that suits them and stop exploring further. Thus, they end up feeling more satisfied with the outcome.

In the coming days, the production of content will only increase and give rise to more options, but there's no need to consume beyond your capacity or worry about better alternatives. Therefore, the next time you decide to watch a movie, just sit back and relax.

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Adhora Ahmed daydreams too much. Send her reality checks at adhora.ahmed@gmail.com

THE DEFINITIVE YOUTH MAGAZINE **SHOUT**



The Lores of *Folklore*

TASNIM ODRIKA

We have all watched Taylor Swift grow from a 15-year-old country singer to a pop icon with the release of *Red*. Backed up by heavy electronic music, she delved into a darker persona in the wake of the mass public scrutiny during her *Reputation* era. Finally, she sobered down and grew into a sparkling pop princess in *Lover*.

There had always been arguments and disagreements over which one of her personas and albums brought out the best of her to us, musically. And, although her stark transition from *Reputation* to *Lover* had been surprising for all of us, it did not catch us as off guard as her latest 2020 release.

On June 23, Taylor Swift announced the release of *Folklore* and in less than 24 hours, she rolled out the album for the public to devour.

Folklore is unlike her previous releases in more than one ways. For one, the swift drop with no prior promotions and teasers contrasts her musical career so far, or at least since *Red* when social media promotions had taken off. Taylor Swift has had her own style of promoting her albums with months of teasers and Easter eggs hidden in all her media appearances. Compared to all of that when we look at *Folklore* and its release, it seems more raw and intimate.

In *Folklore* she has left behind the glam and glitter and even the album art seems like a grainy image collected from the hazy memory lanes of a person; which is exactly what the album itself is. There are no "singles" and no songs specially formulated with catchy hooks to be stuck in our minds and to be played on the speakers of every mall outlet in a loop. But, even then you will be coming



back for more because this time, instead of the catchy hooks, it will be the stories that will be stuck with you.

The whole album is a collection of indie-pop ballads with her vocals and storytelling taking centre-stage this time away from all the musical processing of her usual pop music. However, what sets this album apart from the rest is the sincerity behind her voice this time. In the past she seemed to have struggled to find her place in music and the flashy radio-friendly hits have been put down by fans

on many occasions. She always seemed to have sung for her fans and wrote songs trying to appease them.

So, what is this album trying to do? This time around, she has found her own voice. She is pouring her imagination onto paper and she is writing these stories solely for herself. Then later on, as if an afterthought, she shares her creation with the public.

Tasnim Odrika can be reached at odrika_02@yahoo.com

A Quick Quiz

FARNAZ FAWAD HASAN

What kind of bread are you? Which Hogwarts house do you belong to? Who is your celebrity lookalike?

If these questions ring a bell in your head, congratulations, you have fallen down a rabbit hole to the quirky and outlandish world of online quizzes.

We humans are strikingly similar yet unique in our own ways. Inherently, most people like to know about themselves. A Harvard study shows that people indulge in talking about themselves almost 40 percent of the time. They get a natural high from self-disclosure. Narcissists, although notoriously known to come off as condescending, are well present in all of us to some extent. Taking a quiz serves both of these purposes. People like to categorise themselves and online quizzes are a gateway for self-exposure. It gives us information about the deepest, darkest personality traits and helps us come to terms with our attributes in a rather enjoyable manner. They are interactive and a guaranteed conversation starter. Quizzes are a great way of self-assessment and putting yourself out to others without sounding smug.

Quizzes have been around for ages. Newspaper quizzes were the highlight of the day for many in the past. This feature has been made more accessible to us with the aid of a little "Share" button. Maga-

What Kind Of Pasta Are You?

What's your inner noodle?

posted on March 14, 2014 at 12:58pm EDT

Adam Ellis
BuzzFeed Staff

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zines like *Seventeen*, *Vogue* etc. used to have a quiz section on their back covers which later gained online traction. Quizzing has been an effective way of knowledge

retention and evaluation for decades. TV shows like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* and *Jeopardy!* have gained popularity over the years along with apps and sites like

QuizUp, Mentalfloss, Zimbio and many more.

You might have come across gleeful posts by your friends about an app telling them that they look like Ryan Reynolds. Maybe you also had the urge to test which celebrity you look like. Trust me, we've all been there. This is the power of shareable content. Quizzes are an effective and engaging marketing tool. It's compelling and irresistible nature helps companies lure consumers into their content. BuzzFeed earns 75 percent of their overall website traffic from their quizzes. Many companies use quizzes to help build personalised subscription boxes to cater to their customers.

Although the results of most online quizzes are not scientifically backed up they do provide some insights about individual choices and characteristics. Apart from these there are a few other personality tests which yield somewhat accurate results. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test, Rorschach test or Inkblot test, Alignment test and The Sorting Hat Quiz are a few worth mentioning.

No matter what your reasoning might be, it's never a bad thing to take a quiz. So go on and find out which Pokémon you are.

Farnaz Fawad Hasan wants to go skydiving. Send her more stuff to add to her bucket list at farnazfawadhasan@gmail.com

STUCK IN TIME

NOX

"...Living by your wits is always knowing where the wasps are," I read. And then yawned. I looked up at the clock and noticed it was a quarter past three. Quarantine had really robbed me of all sense of time. I was lucky if I slept by dawn and awoke before sunset.

I would also get hungry at all hours of the day. Somehow healthy eating seemed to be very low on the list of priorities at the moment, which mostly consisted of stressing about things that were out of my control, and making sure I kept all the demons locked up nice and tight. Introspection, with all its marvellous repercussions, was a luxury I could not afford while being trapped in this hellhole.

Of course the new routine did have its perks, I conceded, as I left my room to grab some grub. It allowed for the sweet pleasure of evading the presence, and thereby the combined look of displeasure and disappointment, of every other living being in this household. With no outlet to confront me, their constant complaints about my "unacceptable behaviour", and concerns that my life was "spinning out of control" were stacking up like a perfectly constructed Jenga pile. They would love to collapse the entire setup on my seemingly unburdened mind any day now, but three weeks in, I had managed to avoid engaging them all, and I had no intention of changing that score any time soon. If I did silently lie in bed and listen to them in the living room go on about me for hours on end, I saw no reason to make them aware of such conduct.

I kept the doorknob turned while shutting the door behind me, in order to remain as silent as possible, letting the knob slowly ease back when the door was already shut. I had had to sneak around this house for over a decade now. When it came to making my way around these floors, I was as dead silent as a cat right before it's about to pounce.

I made my way through the corridor that joined my room to the rest of the flat and crossed the empty dining room to get to the fridge on the other side. The fridge was silent, the microwave was not, which meant my options were restricted to cheese, chocolates, and an orange that looked hopefully up at me from the bottom shelf.

"Can't have you, I'm afraid. You're too much trouble to cut up at this moment," I whispered to the orange, and then, taking a minute to consider, picked the block of cheddar over the bar of Whittaker's. To be fair, I'd have to slice this too, but I had realised I wasn't in the mood for a sweet treat.

I closed the door to the fridge, turned around with the block of cheese in hand, and almost immediately dropped it. Well, nearly. I managed to grab it mid-drop so that only the quietest crinkle of the plastic covering carried through the air.

My sudden clumsiness was a result of the fact that I was no longer alone. Sitting across the room at the head of the dining table was my sister, Srishtee. I rolled my eyes at her while shaking my head.

"What are you doing here? You almost gave me a heart attack," I said.

"What are you doing eating cheese this late at night? You know that stuff gives you acidity," she replied in turn.

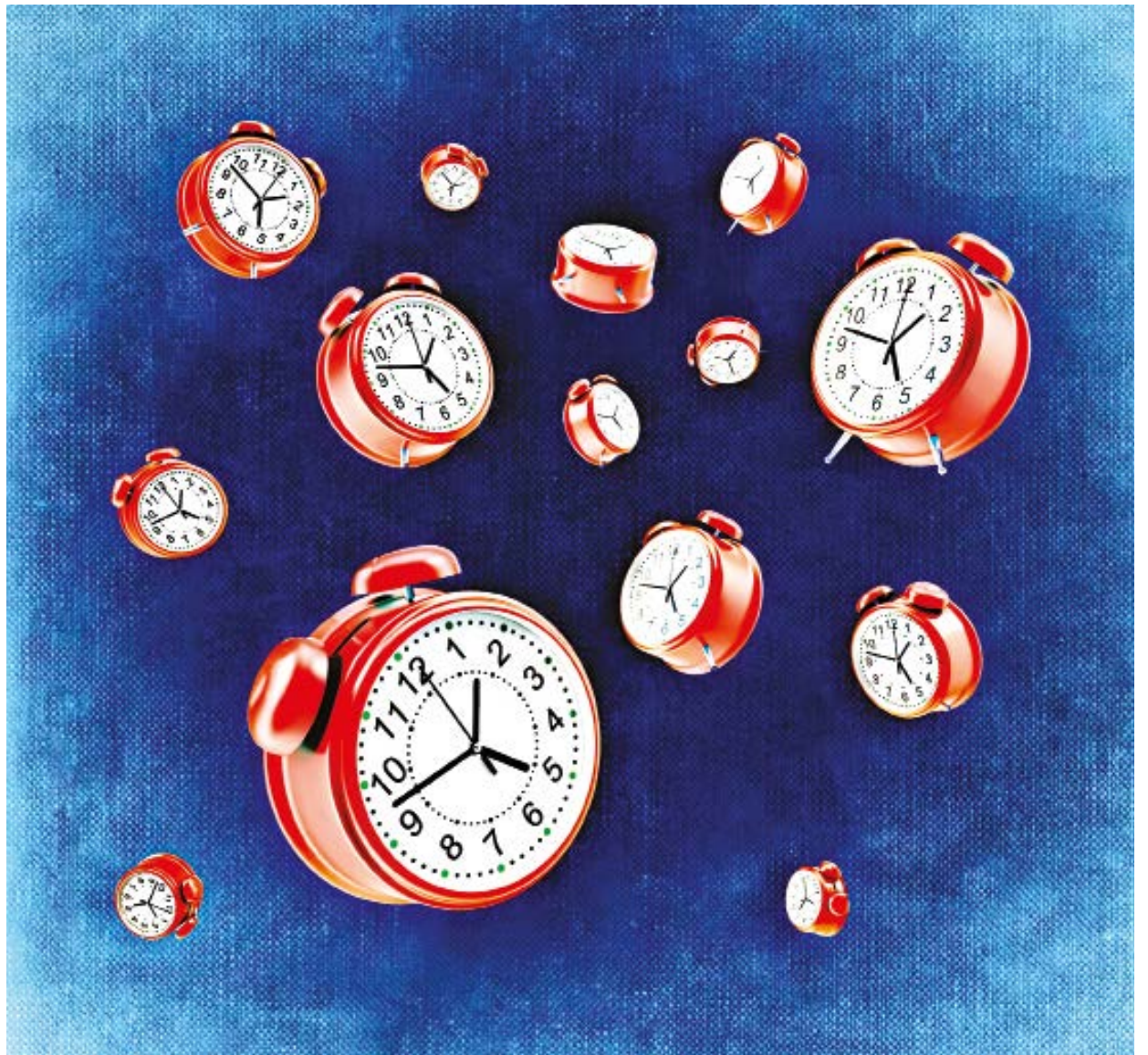
"I'll take my chances. Dad scrapes off way too much of this stuff everyday anyway. If I don't take my share at night he'll finish it off without me getting to even try it."

This time she was the one to shake her head. "The lactose intolerance denial just runs in the family."

I snorted at this and made my way around her to get to the kitchen. To be completely honest, the kitchen always spooked me after dark, especially if I had to open any of the cabinets under the sink. Who knew what I would witness one of these days in there? Given the current situation, the irony of that statement wasn't lost on me.

Fortunately, all I needed today was a knife and a plate, both resting on the countertop. Regardless, my pace still quickened, almost subconsciously, as I turned my back on the kitchen to make my way to the safety of the dining room again. *Definitely spooky*, I thought, a slight shiver running down my back as I finally stepped out of that room.

Srishtee was still sitting silently where I'd last seen her, fiddling with her nails.



"I'm telling you," she started, once I'd settled myself on the chair to her left, "you shouldn't be eating that right now. Go put it back."

"Or what? You'll tell mom?" I asked with a snort.

"I could, you know," she said with a smirk.

"Oh Lord please let me be a fly on the wall for that conversation," I said without missing a beat.

Then we both burst out laughing. So hard, in fact, that we were practically doubled up, wheezing.

Once the laughter had subsided, and the tears wiped, I started slicing my cheese. The cheddar had a very strong aroma, which I absolutely loved, and Srishtee couldn't stand. She stared at me, quietly, but with an expression of mild disgust, as I helped myself to a few slices of varying thickness.

After a while, just to mess with her I raised the plate towards her and said, "Want some?"

She rolled her eyes at me and replied, "Urgh, not even if you paid me to."

"Hmm, I wonder what you'd do with the money," I mused.

"Oh, wouldn't you like to know," said Srishtee, with a knowing smirk.

"Actually, I don't think I would. Some mysteries are just meant to remain mysteries, y'know?"

"Yeah," she said, looking down, suddenly sombre, "I know."

Instantly I felt my throat seize up. A lump the size of a chicken's egg had lodged itself into my chest. I gulped, and blinked back the moisture that was threatening to well up in my eyes.

"Hey, lighten up," I said, my voice cracking only the slightest amount. "Guess what? Chachi is going to tell Dadu that she wants to move out of this house."

"No way! That's an argument I'll be around for," she

said.

"We should probably clear out the furniture for it though," I said, chuckling.

"I doubt Chachi's going to throw another chair. Been there done that, you know? Maybe she'll poison her food this time..." she considered thoughtfully.

"Remember the time when..."

It worked. She was quickly hooked onto the familiar gossip, forgetting her prior mood. Or maybe she pretended for me, as I did for her.

We talked for what seemed like hours. I remembered to put the cheese away. I also washed my plate and knife, preferring the sink in the dining room over the one in the kitchen, to get rid of all evidence of my midnight snack. We chatted through it all, Srishtee following me around the house.

We were sitting at the dining table again when we heard the grandfather clock in the living room strike five.

"I have to go now," said Srishtee with a sigh.

"Yeah...me too. Mom will be up any minute now," I said, getting up. Srishtee remained seated.

"Well...good night," she said.

"Good... Whatever time it is over there," I said, turning away and walking towards my room.

"Actually, there is no time at all there. That concept only exists on this plane," I heard her say.

"Wait what?" I exclaimed, stopping in my tracks. I turned around, only to be met with an empty table and six unoccupied chairs.

"Oops," said a disembodied voice from somewhere above, followed by a peal of mischievous laughter.

Nox endlessly worries about hostile alien surveillance. Increase this paranoid person's online footprint with feedback at nox.thewriter@gmail.com



BREATHTAKING

How do you explain a world without love?
The only grip holding it is that of death.
When in summer, all we wanted was to smell the flowers
All we fight for is one single breath.

PHOTO: SYED MAHAMUDUR RAHMAN
TEXT: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

