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## THE BEST SELF FOR WHOM: AGENCY, ACTION, AND CAPACITY IN TED TALK MOTIVATIONAL SPEECHES

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# Thesis of Bilal A. Amodu

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

## Master of Science Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University  
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

July 2022

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THE BEST SELF FOR WHOM: AGENCY, ACTION, AND CAPACITY IN TED  
TALK MOTIVATIONAL SPEECHES

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Bilal Amodu

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

Nova Southeastern University

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## ABSTRACT

The contemporary United States is characterized by rising standards of productivity in pursuit of success, which James Daniel suggests has caused significant physical and mental strain for many. Self-help materials, such as motivational video lectures, often exploit this discomfort to present specific ideologies as “solutions” to an audience’s anxiety, sense of insufficiency and perceived failure. This project evaluates motivational video lectures from TED to determine how their rhetoric constructs success. This project uses Burkean cluster criticism and queer influenced methodologies to illuminate an understanding of success characterized by perceived action and sustained by stigma. The project finds that the speakers represent success as eminently accessible to those “resourceful” enough to exert action towards it. This emphasis on general accessibility uses stigma to identify the activities and individuals as successful in our contemporary rhetorical ecology. These results can guide rhetorical studies scholars in challenging popular representations of success and locating more nuanced and inclusive understandings.

*Keywords: TED, Cluster Criticism, Productivity, Agency, Self-Help Rhetoric, Multimedia, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ideographs*

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## The Best Self for Whom: Agency, Action, and Capacity in TED Talk Motivational Speeches

### Introduction

In a 2021 survey posted on the job seeking website, Indeed.com, 52 percent of respondents reported experiencing burnout (Kelly). Burnout, a state of “emotional and physical exhaustion that is brought upon by long periods of constant unrelenting stress” (Kelly) has resulted, in part, from the pandemic and the expectation that Americans remain productive by performing their jobs even while under tremendous stress. Given the demands of “excessive productivity” (Daniel) that contemporary culture expects from its workers, an increasing number of them are likely to feel insufficient as they struggle or fail to fulfill these expectations. This trend of rising productivity expectations and higher sentiments of insufficiency among workers has created an ideal rhetorical environment for self-help media, particularly motivational speeches. In what James Daniel, a scholar of critical theory and writing pedagogy, describes as a “culture of productivity,” our daily lives are characterized by professional frustrations and mental health challenges that have become the target of myriad self-help materials. These materials appear in a variety of media, such as books, pamphlets, speeches, and social media posts, and many of us encounter this content in one or several of its forms at multiple intervals throughout the day. Many of these materials contribute to an “overemphasized self-improvement message” (Jones 91), which, according to Micki McGee, results from a sense of “insufficiency” that these works identify with and reinforce (18). These works rhetorically frame individual workers as the “problem” or cause of this insufficiency, while the motivation speakers and the advice they dispense are the “solution” these workers desperately require. This model allows motivational speakers to establish an *ethos* for their perceived insight, which they often use to market their materials, such as books, in-person, or virtual training seminars or extensive

retreats, to audiences eager to attain what these speakers' market as success. Further, the development of content sharing features enabled by social media platforms allow motivational self-help discourse to proliferate in a digital space as something employers, workers, and prominent digital influencers can share publicly to reinforce arguments about what success is and how it might be attained.

Rhetorical scholarship has yet to extensively examine the structural components and functional aspects of online video lectures that allow the genre to establish expectations for what individuals are to achieve and how they are expected to strive toward it. While some scholars, such as public and interpersonal communication scholar K. J. Denker, explore how the individualistic discourse propagated by self-help rhetoric reinforces inequality and self-blame discourse (4), rhetorical studies has not systematically explored how digital self-help media accomplishes this through the construction of rigid, marginalizing binaries. Therefore, this project examines discourses of productivity perpetuated by online self-help motivational videos and how their emphasis on agency and individual action creates a rhetorical binary between success and failure. I will also attend to the ableist assumptions that support this binary and the marginalizing impact it may have upon those unable to attain these ideals. The objective of this project is not to discredit ideals of work, ambition, and achievement, but rather, to help the field of rhetorical scholarship envision how these ideals might be conceived and communicated in a more sustainable, inclusive, and accessible manner—one that allows individuals to articulate goals without stigma and understand achievement as more than an enduring reliance on willpower or innate internal drive. My work also encourages discourse about success that is more inclusive of diverse abilities and that emphasizes individuals as people with complex needs, rather than as economic vehicles.

To explore self-help rhetorics of productivity and success, my analysis will focus on two video lectures produced by Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) Conferences LLC. TED is a nonprofit organization that venerates “the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives, and ultimately the world” (TED). This veneration of ideas, and the organization’s aim to spread “great ideas,” invites evaluating how ideals such as action, productivity and success are revered and subsequently circulated to a wide and diverse audience. TED conferences are held throughout the world and the video lectures shared at these conferences are often available digitally, either on the TED website or other public video sharing websites such as YouTube, and transcripts and translations of these talks are often available in over 100 languages. TED’s ability to distribute content online to a diverse international audience creates a multinational digital rhetorical setting in which discourse may form and disseminate. The organization sponsors formal conferences in the form of TED Talks and encourages local organizations to host independent, community-oriented events, TEDx conferences that employ a similar format but operate autonomously on a smaller scale under the TED license (TED). Despite the distinction between these events, video lectures from both are often shared online and function as an effective medium by which to disseminate and reinforce the ideas expressed in the discussions.

The multinational and digital nature of TED as a communication platform offers a unique opportunity to explore how the sentiments expressed in self-help media endure and proliferate within a mainstream discursive environment. To demonstrate this phenomenon, the first artifact this project will examine is the TED Talk “Why We Do What We Do” by author and philanthropist Tony Robbins. This TED Talk describes how individuals may harness emotional energy to maximize their capacity to contribute and achieve. The second artifact, “How to Stop Screwing Yourself Over,” by lawyer, inspirational speaker, and television host Mel Robbins,

outlines how individuals may facilitate change by transcending their comfort zone and natural inclination towards inaction. Both artifacts present compatible, though at times contrasting, understandings of success that ultimately illuminate the broader discursive attitudes and assumptions relating to work, achievement, and the individual in contemporary United States culture. An evaluation of both videos illustrates how TED, in its capacity as an international digital platform, helps construct and circulate self-help rhetoric within a broader rhetorical ecosystem, thereby guiding and reinforcing prevailing discursive representations of work and success.

Within the literature review, I synthesize the rhetorical scholarship that characterizes discursive understandings of productivity and success. This scholarship includes John Ramage's exploration of success as an ideological construct and its role in reinforcing labor expectations in the United States, as well as Catherine Chaput's conception of value as a rhetorical mode of appraisal in a neoliberal, economically oriented discourse. I also contextualize this scholarship within Miron and Siebers's research relating to disability to examine the limits of the supposedly universal scope applied by self-help rhetoric and explain how this scope is nonetheless maintained using stigma. The concept of stigma as understood in this project is influenced by Kerschbaum and Johnson's research into the rhetoric of disability, specifically how stigma suppresses the disclosure of disability and consequently ensures the marginalization of those with mental and physical limitations.

The methods section discusses the two selected artifacts and outlines how they were analyzed. Within this section, I describe Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and how a review of the artifacts' textual and multimodal features provides an opportunity to identify the significant discursive trends they perpetuate. The project's use of CDA is informed by the Burkean analytic

method of cluster criticism, which employs key terms to identify rhetorical patterns and relationships, as well as Michael Calvin McGee's concept of ideographs, which illustrate how terms may reflect a discourse's "deeply ingrained cultural assumption" (Hutchinson 25). The project's approach to CDA is also influenced by a queer perspective, as this theoretical perspective is useful in illuminating how the discursive power structure of success is constructed in part by oppressive, rigid conceptual binaries. A queer informed methodology guides this project in identifying the impact of oppressive and marginalizing binaries in contemporary success-orienting discourse, and in the process of evaluating them, confront the discourse's socially repressive features.

The analysis section identifies the key terms in both artifacts and the categories of terms that cluster around them. This section determines how each speaker represents success as an ideal and outlines the path by which it is attained. The relationships developed through analysis suggest an emphasis on action that contributes to a binary between success and failure in which success is conflated with action. This emphasis upon action also informs how other key terms are represented by creating an impression wherein affect is viewed as either a medium or obstacle, and agency is an implied corequisite to attaining success. Understanding this rhetorical binary and the roles of agency, affect, and the objectives of success unveil a discourse that perpetually demands transformation and action, regardless of external circumstances and limitations.

In addition to the scholarship represented in the literature review, this project will rely extensively upon the two TED talks to identify the presence of a success-failure oriented binary in self-help media and explore the marginalizing assumptions that support it. In outlining this binary, this project aims not to invalidate the emphasis upon action entirely, but to help rhetorical scholars envision performance, affect, and success more complexly to develop more sustainable

models and understandings of how to work and manage goals. This understanding is particularly relevant to guiding those in the United States to evaluate our broader collective understandings of labor, livelihood, and the accessibility of the American Dream, particularly amidst rising concerns regarding mental health and burnout.

## **Literature Review**

Discursive representations of success emphasize productivity as an indicator of achievement and an individual's consequent value, placing tremendous stress upon those who are expected to be productive while marginalizing those who cannot be. And yet, scholarship in rhetorical studies has devoted little attention to discursive representations of work and success. While research about the rhetoric of productivity is limited, an analysis of scholarship about labor, neoliberal discourse, and disability studies reveals how ableist, labor-oriented discourses measure an individual's worth by the economic value of what they might contribute to the larger collective. A survey of economic, disability, and queer scholarship suggests that discourses of success employed in and promoted by self-help materials can often be detrimental to identity and self-expression, specifically for individuals unable to attain the standards set by these discourses.

### *Work as a Medium for Success: Idealization of Labor and the Worker*

One recurrent theme throughout the scholarship is the exaltation of work as a medium for success, an exaltation which serves to characterize the activities, behaviors, and attitudes presented as successful. For example, John Ramage interrogates the relationship between success, productivity, and self-worth to illuminate how success is rhetorically constructed. Ramage attributes our contemporary concept of success to the emergence of capitalism and the United States' shift to a market economy during the early nineteenth century (29). Ramage asserts that because of this transformation, success manuals published during the nineteenth

century characterized a successful individual as a “self-reliant but absolutely subservient worker,” (51), who is stoic and resilient in the face of adversity and embraces their submission to a broader economic and social order. Phillip Marzluf extends Ramage’s characterization of success to include aptitude, which he asserts serves to rank and categorize individuals based on their capacity for success or failure (295). Marzluf illuminates the often-imperceptible presence of aptitude in our discourse, which is often guided by assumptions of the “neutrality of science” and the “reification of innateness” (295). Thus, if the successful individual is a resilient worker who complies humbly with the demands of his or her social order, Marzluf’s observations suggest that such a capacity for success is often viewed as innate ability to be assessed, supposedly using objective scientific means. Ramage and Marzluf’s scholarship demonstrate society’s overvaluing of and expectations for productivity, and how it places the responsibility for attaining the ideals upon the individual as a means of assessing capacity. These understandings of success, productivity, and the individual effectively create the ideal persona self-help materials encourage their audiences to access or strive towards depending on the framework.

In addition to promoting the persona of an idealized worker, self-help materials also emphasize the individual’s capacity to attain this ideal through conscious choice. Candace Miller extends and complicates Marzluf’s observations about aptitude through her definition of agency, which illuminates the implicit sentiment within self-help materials that emphasizes the audience’s potential to complete any task it envisions. Miller links agency with kinetic energy suggesting that success is an active choice rather than a passive circumstance (147). This view of agency as active, rather than passive, places the responsibility for success not on the individual’s aptitude, as Marzluf notes, but on his or her decisions. The notion of individuals assuming

personal control in their success contrasts significantly with Ramage's image of the successful individual as the compliant worker, a paradox Ramage acknowledges. Ramage asserts that nineteenth century managers reconcile this paradox by "dissociating self-reliance from the capacity for independent thought" (51), therefore lauding workers who could accomplish tasks before they were assigned while stigmatizing those who questioned the nature of the work in which they were involved. Although the sentiments Ramage describes were initially expressed during the nineteenth century, he assures readers that they continue to influence how employers view their employees. Thus, Ramage and Marzluf's observations along with Miller's understanding of success present us with a specific image of the successful individual as one with the capacity to voluntarily submit his or her labor to a broader economic and social structure and to do so while exhibiting resilience and skill when challenged by adversity. This willingness to submit to economic and social structures and demonstrate resilience characterizes the rhetorical ideal of success as constructed in self-help materials as well as their intended audience.

The emphasis on activity, aptitude, and agency in self-help materials constructs the ideal of success and represents conscious, devoted labor as a path to attain it. Given that work and labor are also represented as tantamount to success, it is worth examining the rhetoric surrounding work in greater detail. David Seitz discusses how many of the college students he encounters are more concerned with the "economic capital" afforded by a college education and thus are more inclined to value "hard work" even in exploitive systems (211). Further, Albert Rouzie illustrates how contemporary discourse creates a dichotomy between work and play, rendering the former "serious" and the latter "frivolous" (628). Rouzie's observations indicate that work functions as both an avenue to success, as Seitz and Ramage suggest, while also demonstrating utility as an essential characteristic of work. This scholarship describes work as a

medium by which individuals can succeed, allowing self-help materials to present labor as a means to facilitate radical personal transformations.

*Measuring Success and Self-Worth: Agency and Activity as Generating Value*

One specific attribute of work that guides how self-help materials appraise the impact of a person's action is value. For Catherine Chaput, value, in a neoliberal economic context, "measures the products of human labor" (13). Chaput further asserts that value is used not only as a measure of labor's utility but also to "secure both our economic and discursive systems" (13). This characterization of value reinforces Ramage's research by placing the rhetoric of work in a definitively economic context while also providing a tangible metric for appraising labor. To account for the relationship between economics and rhetoric, Chaput proposes the Critical Rhetorical Circulation Model, which identifies value as a mode of action, illustrating the extent to which labor and our discourse are oriented around tangible value (21). Chaput's emphasis on value reinforces the work-play dichotomy Rouzie describes by presenting work as an activity that has tangible value, and play, by contrast, as being without a practical function or use. Value, in its implicit yet enduring connection to work, thus emerges as the metric by which activities are assessed and appraised for their relation to success. The emphasis upon value in self-help materials creates a narrow spectrum of activities that are valuable, implicitly persuading the audience to adopt a binary understanding that conflates activities that produce tangible value with success and activities that fail to do so with failure. Additionally, prioritizing certain activities above others, specifically those that involve generating an income or actively sustaining the social order, allows those who are seen as actively striving toward productivity as successful, while those whose inactivity or activities are perceived otherwise are often subject to

explicit or implied stigma. Thus, in the context of self-help materials, Chaput's concept of value provides a means to appraise the value of both an individual's actions and identity.

Although Chaput's research situates the rhetoric of work within an economic context, additional scholarship illustrates how national interests and discourses can determine what work is valuable, and the role of work in appraising individual worth and hence capacity for success. Jennifer Keohane's scholarship extends the relationship between work and individual value by illustrating how a discursive emphasis on labor and production functions to marginalize and disembody others. Keohane's argument focuses specifically on how a discursive emphasis on labor and value develops and reinforces nationalist sentiments about immigration and citizenship. Keohane's representation of how the Knights of Labor demonstrated citizenship through "the physicality of their labor" (75) illustrates the role of labor as a performative exercise for external validation. Thus, rather than simply functioning as an indicator of utility and economic worth, Keohane suggests that the integration of labor and citizenship can promote a specific cultural standard regarding work and workers. As Keohane demonstrates through the Knights of Labor's mobilization against Chinese immigrants, this standard can serve to not only affirm citizenship but also exclude those who exist beyond it. Keohane's observations are extended by Deborah Brandt's extensive research into the laws that regulate writing, which demonstrates that writers are often "legally severed" from their written products and thereby their labor (171). Therefore, Brandt's article contributes to an irony of workers being defined by their ability to produce labor to which they have no claim. This irony illustrates how the discourse surrounding labor and work can dehumanize individual workers by separating them from the products of their labor. Although Keohane considers the broader discursive implications of this dehumanization, she does not explore how this view of labor impacts those marginalized

and excluded from it. Keohane's work nonetheless illuminates the implication within self-help materials that the individual is only at their most optimal state of being when striving to work and generate value for the broader social order, which in turn suggests that those not within nor actively aspiring toward this state may be denied recognition or acceptance within a productivity- and success-oriented discourse and culture.

Although Keohane's scholarship demonstrates the significance of labor and value in appraising an individual's acceptance in a social order, James Daniel suggests that a social order's reliance on external indicators of performance to determine belonging negatively impact one's ability to sustainably exist within it. In his article, Daniel demonstrates how the rhetorical discourse sustains cultural and systemic efforts that influence individuals to strive toward an optimal state of productivity. He outlines the rhetorical construction and impact of a discourse that extolls productivity and emphasizes work as a medium by which to attain success and hence validation. Daniel's article articulates the physical, spiritual, and psychological toll one may experience from the increased demands of a productivity-oriented professional structure. In presenting "liberatory" self-expression as "counteragent to the dominant professional rhetoric of obedience and efficiency," Daniel not only critiques this rhetorical structure but also illuminates the limited scholarly attention devoted to overwork, inviting future composition and rhetoric scholars to explore this area. However, although Daniel expresses concern for the self-expressive rights and capabilities of the individuals immersed in this rhetoric, he does not explicitly identify this dominant societal rhetoric surrounding work as oppressive nor considers its marginalizing impacts extensively. Despite his limited focus on the disenfranchising potential of the discursive concepts of work and productivity, Daniel's scholarship does suggest that these discursive concepts create intense standards and expectations of an ideal that many individuals struggle to

attain without a significant physical and psychological toll. This understanding not only presents these concepts as illusory and unsustainable but also invites further consideration of how those who cannot endure said toll are presented and perceived in a discursive climate that relies on external indicators of productivity to measure individual worth.

*Marginalization and Ability: Success as Validation*

Layli Miron's research problematizes our contemporary social order's emphasis on productivity and performative labor through her explicit consideration of how this emphasis serves to marginalize individuals with disabilities from broader conversations relating to success and value. In her article, Miron reinforces Daniel's representation of the illusory and unsustainable nature of success as an ideal by emphasizing the marginalizing impacts of the concept for those whom it explicitly disenfranchises. Miron's scholarship is informed by Tobin Siebers' concept of the ideology of ability, which Siebers asserts "defines the baseline by which humaneness is determined" and creates "a standard of body and mind that gives or denies human status" (273). Siebers' text specifically contributes the concept of ableism as one of the fundamental discursive assumptions that underlie the rhetoric of success and work. Miron's research responds to and extends Siebers' exploration of ableism by exposing its significance to a broader national collective. Miron's discussion of how governments employ a "topos of fitness" as a means of excluding individuals with disabilities from policies (447) extends Keohane's scholarship by illustrating the ableist sentiments embedded in rhetorical representations of labor as an expression of belonging and citizenship. Miron's efforts to explore the disabling impact this paradigm has upon those whom it excludes illuminates the often nativist and xenophobic impulses that guide this discourse. Miron's matrix of how immigrants are viewed and valued in relation to their labor and ability also serves as a practical extension of

Chaput's concept of value and Marzluf's exploration of aptitude. Thus, a disability-oriented perspective unveils how the emphasis on work and value can marginalize and disenfranchise those physically or mentally unable to perform in accordance with the social structure's elevated standards. Miron's article offers significant clarity into how self-help materials, particularly those propagated and favored by a given social structure, may create a limited and ultimately flawed binary of the types of activities, and hence individuals, recognized as successful. This binary strives to offer observers a supposedly empirical approach to determining who is and is not successful without inviting further consideration of the assumptions and social structures that underlie it. The mere existence of this binary demonstrates the problematic aspects of self-help rhetoric's focus on individual performance and presents an opportunity to explore how these aspects can reinforce oppressive discursive systems and perpetuate marginalization within a rhetorical ecosystem.

Miron and other scholars offer insight into how the rhetorical binary created by self-help materials is oriented around ability. In addition to reinforcing Keohane's research into the nationalist and exclusionary implications of the rhetorical construct of work, Miron also introduces the value of incorporating a disability-oriented focus to examining the marginalizing effect that current representations of work and success can have upon individuals. In his overview of research in mental health rhetoric, J. Fred Reynolds contextualizes Siebers's and Miron's work within the broader scholarly conversation regarding mental health. For Reynolds, scholarship such as Siebers's and Miron's comprise a trend within mental health rhetoric studies that aim to "reduce negative stereotypes" and increase audiences' awareness of differences (13). One scholar who contributed to this trend is Jennell Johnson, whose article elaborates upon the marginalization of mental illness and disability in our popular discourse through its focus on the

role of stigma. Johnson's illumination of stigma's role in rendering one's defects visible to an external audience (463) introduces stigma as a marginalizing force. The marginalizing function of stigma functions as a mechanism by which a rhetorical culture maintains oppressive binaries. Johnson's view that stigma contributes to a "devalued identity" (466) demonstrates one of the main rhetorical mechanisms employed in self-help materials, such as TED Talks, to marginalize those whose lived experiences undermine their assertions by situating them beyond a value-oriented rhetorical ecosystem.

Kerschbaum also extends Siebers's research into the relationship between ableism and disability in illuminating how an ableism-oriented discourse recognizes and interacts with disability. Kerschbaum's notion of disclosure, which she characterizes as "an orientation to particular perceptions and meanings" that occurs in a specific physical and temporal setting, (*Signs of Disability, Disclosing*), evokes Sarah Ahmed's "feminist killjoy." As the feminist killjoy causes "unhappiness" by challenging impressions of how "we live an individual life" (Ahmad), disclosure, as a discursive practice, illustrates how individuals with disabilities interact with their external physical and cultural environment and its expectations, subverting the happiness "used to justify social norms as social goods" (Ahmad). In her discussion of stigma, Johnson describes how stigmatized individuals attempt to conceal traits such as disabilities to "pass" for normal (465). Miron justifies this impulse to conceal disabilities by citing what she refers to as a "topos of fitness" that governments employ to exclude individuals from policies and discusses how these policies often disproportionately impact immigrants with disabilities (448). Thus, given the marginalization and loss of opportunity many individuals with disabilities face from disclosure, many of them are in the conflicted position of either facing the repercussions of disclosure, or concealing their disabilities only to face the repercussions of

potential discovery. The need of individuals with disabilities to conceal these traits to receive recognition and acceptance reinforces their exclusion from the success-oriented discourses of self-help materials that often emphasize the capacity of all individuals to attain inflated standards and present the ability to succeed as an act of will rather than circumstance.

Although assumptions regarding work significantly impact those who are marginalized, rhetorical scholarship demonstrates how these beliefs may shape and proliferate within a discourse. Jenny Edbauer's representation of a discursive setting as a rhetorical ecology illuminates how prevailing beliefs about work and labor perpetuate in a social order. For Edbauer, the rhetorical ecology is an "open network" characterized by an "ongoing circulation process" (13). Chaput asserts that the ongoing circulation Edbauer describes allows rhetoric to offer value to everyday practices (6), which in turn provides a rhetorical ecology with a broad impact that has tremendous persuasive capacity (8). While Chaput demonstrates how a contemporary rhetorical process is inherently oriented around sustaining and perpetuating value, Michelle Gibbons illustrates how beliefs about the mind, *doxa* inhabit the "realm of the undiscussed" and thereby permits a discourse to "create, enact and sustain power" (443). Gibbons's article contributes significant insight into the formulation and perpetuation of beliefs within a discourse by illustrating how beliefs about work and capacity inform success-oriented rhetoric. Gibbons's work reinforces Siebers' scholarship into the embedded dominance of ableist rhetoric in our discourse and contributes to a queer endeavor to interrogate and illuminate the influence of concealed power structures. In tandem with Ridolfo and DeVoss's characterization of rhetorical velocity, Gibbons's scholarship explains how the ideals of the self and one's work not only exist in our discourse but have been elevated and proliferated in large part by self-help materials. Therefore, although success as a discursive concept is marginalizing, ableist, and

unsustainable, it has also been effective in creating and reinforcing its presence in our broader discourse, allowing it to regulate how we perceive activity, agency, and individual self-worth. This presence has resulted in rigid, while implicit, binaries that impact how individuals perceive themselves, their work, and each other.

As McGee asserts, the implicit, rigid binaries that characterize how we see ourselves and our work have proven an integral component of self-help materials. According to McGee, self-help materials anticipate their audience's perceived self-insufficiency as they assume their readers are "lacking some essential feature of adequacy" in order to present themselves, or at least the ideology they promote, as "the solution" (18). In essence, self-help materials aim to help individuals identify and correct a perceived deficiency that prevents them from performing in a way that fulfills productivity expectations. These resources offer readers guidance as to how they may function more optimally for the benefit of the broader societal system. Dana Cloud, a noted critical rhetoric and cultural studies scholar, identifies this societal function of self-help rhetoric, discussing how a discursive emphasis on productivity and improvement functions as a "political strategy of contemporary capitalism," that specifically strives to relegate dissent to a discourse of "individual and family responsibility" (xv). The emphasis on the individual as the source of both inferiority and improvement relates to what Jones characterizes as "overemphasized individualism" (91) that he asserts focuses on "personal well-being" and "self-development" (78). This discursive concept envisions the individual as exclusively capable and responsible of attaining the ideals that have been set by the broader social order. Moreover, there is an overwhelming implication that in attaining these ideals, the individual may then be understood as successful. In their article, Stephanie Young and D'Arcy J. Reynolds identify autonomy as a criterion for attaining these ideals by outlining how the discourse of self-help emphasizes values

such as “self-reliance, autonomy and personal empowerment” to “encourage the individualistic ideas of neoliberalism” as well as dismiss or diminish “structural constraints” that present individuals as exclusively responsible for their survival and sustenance in socioeconomic settings (7). Therefore, self-help materials serve as a rhetorical means to reinforce a neoliberal social order’s aims and existence while absolving it of responsibility for the individuals who comprise it.

Thus, rhetorical scholarship unveils how self-help materials might encourage users to be productive and strive for success only insofar as they produce pragmatic and value laden results. Further scholarship can illustrate rhetorical techniques through which these materials propagate such messages and the role of stigma and disclosure in marginalizing the experiences of those unable to adhere to the steps outlined in self-help materials. An evaluation of two video lectures from TED illuminates how what we understand as successful is often conflated with action and free will, in a manner that places the decision, and therefore, the responsibility to succeed, upon the individual. The ableist rhetoric that suggests success is a choice that all individuals are equally capable of pursuing demonstrates the problematic nature of a success-oriented discourse that stigmatizes inaction to repress any effort toward individual disclosure. The rhetorical scholarship ultimately invites an opportunity to explore how a value-oriented discourse uses the features of an internet video communications platform to reinforce prevailing attitudes toward labor in a way that marginalizes anyone and anything that is not seen as generating value.

## **Methods**

As mentioned earlier, my analysis focuses on two TED Talks that exist as unique media for presenting and disseminating ideas broadly. Julia Ludewig describes the Ted Talk as a distinct rhetorical genre possessing specific discursive features (3), such as the enthusiastic tones

of the speakers (4) the standard twenty-minute length (5) and its use of pronouns “we” and “us.” In addition to these features, Kedrowicz and Taylor emphasize the visual nature of this medium and its role in allowing presenters to facilitate *ethos* and establish a relationship with audiences (355). This relationship with an exterior audience allows Ted Talks to exist as a distinct rhetorical genre and have a prominent impact on the rhetorical ecology in which success and productivity-oriented rhetoric circulate. As Kedrowicz and Taylor remind us, these talks are accessible to the individuals immediately present at TED sponsored conferences and events as well as secondary audiences of “anyone interested” in the topics (364), prompting the speakers at the events to appeal to the broader audience of those viewing the lectures virtually. For Ludewig, TED speakers’ efforts to appeal to broader audiences are evocative of a sales pitch, albeit one with educational undertones (4), wherein speakers present the central idea of their presentation as a marketable commodity. The broad rhetorical appeal and reliance on persuasive strategies thus renders the TED Talk a valuable resource in illuminating the sentiments and attitudes towards success and labor advocated to a broader discourse, thus allowing each of the artifacts to serve as a microcosm for how understandings of success appear and circulate throughout the rhetorical ecology of the contemporary United States. Due to its multinational audience and digital nature as a platform, TED provided this project with a unique opportunity to relate the findings of the analysis to rhetorical trends at a larger scale. Despite these benefits, the TED Talk as a genre is heavily featured around the speaker and therefore offers a limited opportunity to evaluate the impact of these messages upon audiences, specifically those who may be marginalized or stigmatized by the speakers’ message. Although it is feasible to examine how these talks can be marginalizing by their assumptions of the audience’s capabilities and omission of experiences that undermine their central messages, this format does not offer an opportunity to genuinely

represent or account for the authentic, lived experiences of those marginalized by the speakers' rhetoric.

Still, in the absence of the lived experiences of those marginalized by self-help rhetoric, Critical Discourse Analysis allows us to envision their presence by evaluating how the discursive systems of these Ted Talks facilitate their absence. I employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to evaluate the role of specific key terms in the self-help rhetoric of TED Talks. CDA allows me to identify the social function and power structures present in the artifacts I examine, outline how these dynamics are produced by language, and evaluate the artifacts' role within the broader social and political contexts in which they exist (Huckin et al. 107). As Ian Roderick suggests, CDA can illuminate and interrogate the assumptions underlying the artifacts' "built environment" as well as dismantle the rhetorical strategies and assumptions that underlie their construction, thereby subverting their "deceptive qualities (Roderick 157). Using CDA, I outline how the TED Talk speakers characterize success as a societal objective and the assumptions they rely on to present success as an individually attainable construct. Through CDA, I illustrate how these assumptions contribute to a limited and ultimately volatile discursive concept and explore the social implications of circulating this concept throughout the broader popular discourse. CDA specifically allows me to consider those for whom this concept affords no space by identifying relationships between key and clustering terms that create an overarching impression of success and its supposed accessibility.

In addition to evaluating the words and semiotic features in the artifacts, this project will also evaluate their multimodal features, such as sound, visuals, and audience interaction. As Dave Machin asserts, a multimodal CDA acknowledges the presence of discourse "at every level" (332) and thereby asserts how specific signs and symbols constitute a viewer's ideological

consciousness. Given that both artifacts are videos, a multimodal approach is necessary to account for the multiple layers through which the speakers and artifacts convey meaning. Although emphasis is placed upon the terms the speakers use, other factors, such as their interactions with their respective immediate audiences, visual materials that supplement their presentations, and the physical and digital platforms in which these talks occur, all serve as additional sources of meaning worth examining. Additionally, TED's mission of spreading "great ideas" and the artifacts' multimodal components invite inquiry into how these artifacts circulate among an audience beyond the participants the speakers address directly during their respective talks. This increased access merits considering the talks' existence and proliferation within a larger national, if not global, digital discourse.

The first artifact this project will examine is the TED Talk "Why We Do What We Do" by Tony Robbins. This talk was delivered in 2006 and has 29 million views on the TED.com as of May 2022. Tony Robbins is a nationally renowned speaker and author of six internationally best-selling books, such as *Unleashing the Power Within: Personal Coaching to Transform your Life*, and *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny!*. T. Robbins also hosts seminars in which he directly coaches a group of participants for anywhere between four hundred and eleven hundred dollars (Unleash the Power Within Virtual). His professional website also claims that Robbins has provided personal support and coaching to professional athletes, renowned entertainers, four sitting US presidents and the CEOs of several major corporations (About Tony Robbins). T. Robbins has also gained a reputation for his philanthropic endeavors, most notably his foundation's efforts to provide meals to those in need around the world. T. Robbins has also gained a reputation for his philanthropic endeavors, most notably his foundation's efforts to provide meals to those in need

around the world. It is worth noting that during the past few years T. Robbins has been accused of sexual misconduct by multiple women with allegations that range much of his career (Baker and Bradley). Although T. Robbins and his lawyers have denied the allegations, these issues invite an opportunity to consider how factors such as wealth and privilege complicate the rhetorical binary between success and failure. His 2006 TED Talk places significant emphasis on individual agency and motivation as avenues for success, to the extent of disregarding other factors such as financial limitations and mental health challenges. This video thus offers an opportunity to evaluate the assumptions behind T. Robbins's representations of emotion and decision-making as vehicles for individual success. Furthermore, T. Robbins's characterization of emotion, contribution, and individual force illustrate a discursive hierarchy of value that ultimately characterize and elevate a specific form of individual-oriented success.

The second video this project examines is a June 2011 TEDx talk by Mel Robbins (no relation) entitled "How to Stop Screwing Yourself Over," which has been viewed 29 million times as of May 2022 according to the TED website. M. Robbins holds a law degree from Boston college, and has served as a lawyer, best-selling writer, television host and cable news commentator (*Mel Robbins*). M. Robbins also hosts a series of courses in which she offers personalized coaching to participants. In her talk, M. Robbins places tremendous emphasis on individual capacity and thereby presents success, defined in this talk as obtaining "whatever you want," as an intentional, conscious act that is in the individual's own self-interest (M. Robbins 0:39-0:51). This artifact illustrates the rhetorical techniques M. Robbins employs to convince her audiences of their responsibility for their own success, unveiling how this rhetor integrates concepts of productivity, agency, and individual self-interest to promote a neoliberal and value-derived understanding of success.

By analyzing these two videos together, I demonstrate how they contribute to a broader discursive concept of success and evaluate the assumptions that characterize it. The similarities between these two videos illuminate central characteristics of success, such as a pursuit of value-oriented objectives and an emphasis on individual action and agency, which illustrate how this rhetoric manifests within this particular genre (the TED Talk). Both speakers place significant emphasis on individual action and decision making as a key factor in determining success while diminishing the impact of external circumstances and obstacles. Additionally, both speakers possess significant platforms beyond TED, in the form of books, and online courses, which, as McGee suggests, allows them to use TED as a platform to position themselves and their products as solutions to perceived insufficiencies. Further, the differences between the two talks, such as the speakers' different understandings of how affect impacts one's ability to succeed, offers an opportunity to evaluate the extent to which success as a discursive concept varies across contexts as well as assess its scope and resilience. An analysis of both videos reveals how and to what extent the discursive representation of success is accessible to the vast audience of these talks and outlines the different ways in which the speakers' simultaneously aim to appeal to a universal audience while marginalizing individuals who do not adhere to their understanding of success. These understandings determine the extent to which this concept can viably exist in the broader discourse in a way that is relevant to the individuals who comprise it. These two videos will ultimately allow me to dissect the supposed accessibility of success as a discursive concept, examine the stigmatizing and ultimately problematic assumptions used to construct it, and assess this concept's role in reinforcing economic and social demands for labor that reify individuals as workers.

Cluster analysis is also applied in this study to develop “overarching categories” that provide a foundation for “different readings of a text” (Craig 16). In cluster criticism, the key terms represent central ideas within each of the works and can be identified by either the frequency with which they are used in an artifact, or their significance to the artifact’s broader argument (Foss 66). Clustering terms, according to Kenneth Burke, demonstrate “what subjects cluster around other subjects” (232) and are terms that surround the key terms and illustrate “patterns of uses” that offer insight into how a term functions in an artifact (Angel and Bates 4). In this thesis, cluster criticism allows me to distill the central themes, messages, and assumption in these works as key terms, that offer insight into each artifact’s rhetorical structure. Further, the opportunity to employ clustering terms to define key terms specifically allowed me to assess the multiple connotations and applications of the key terms in relation to success. The process of identifying and defining key terms ultimately displays how each artifact can serve as a model of how the broader rhetorical ecology presents and reinforces notions of what makes a successful individual while stigmatizing those who do not meet these standards.

When conducting the research for this project, I viewed both videos on the Ted website between February and April of 2022. I viewed each video five times, once to acquaint myself with the speakers’ broader messages and twice afterward to identify key terms. While listening to the videos, I copied the transcript of each video into separate Microsoft Word documents and relied on the search function to determine the frequency and intensity of key terms. I then recorded the frequency of each relevant term into a separate Microsoft Word document and relied on the frequency of a given term, or related terms, to identify the key terms. Afterwards, I listened to each video an additional two times to identify cluster terms and relied on the transcripts to locate terms that clustered around the key terms and ideas. I recorded the clustering

terms around the key terms in a separate Word Document and sorted the clustering terms into categories. The number of clustering categories that surround a key term depends on how they key term is employed in the artifact and how the clustering terms relate to each other. For example, the term *contribute*, has only two categories since the clustering terms surrounding it relate either to connection or external obligation, whereas the term *feel* has three categories since the clustering terms relate to consciousness, inhibition, and biological manifestations, three distinct conceptual categories.

In addition to evaluating key terms, this project also examines how the key terms in each of these works relate to broader ideographs, which Michael Calvin McGee defines as terms or symbols that function as “high order abstraction[s] representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal” (15). The ideograph represents how the selected terms may exist as concepts and values in a broader social order, and affords this project a way to connect the key terms identified in the two artifacts, such as *want* and *contribute*, with cultural ideals in the broader rhetorical ecology. Given the ideograph’s capacity to “reflect key values” and “deeply ingrained cultural politics” (Hutchinson 25), I explore how the relationship between key and clustering terms within both speakers’ talks offer insight into the discourse’s assumptions regarding work, labor, and ability while illuminating the impact of neoliberal understandings of value and contribution in our discursive culture. The ideograph augments the project’s analysis of key terms by illuminating how the sentiments towards success expressed in the artifact relate to internalized cultural beliefs regarding success in the United States and the discursive systems that sustain them.

My approach to using CDA as a means of unveiling and challenging power structures and discursive norms is also informed by queer scholarship. An example of this is Sarah Ahmed’s

concept of a killjoy, who is one that “disrupts[s] normativity” and “objectivity,” unveiling and interrogating the assumptions that guide our understanding of ideas and rhetorical situations (Dadas and Cox 190). This project seeks to embrace the killjoy’s willingness to “cause unhappiness” and “go against the social order,” by confronting our discursive understandings of work and success and depicting them as “the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places.”. Although CDA as a methodology is inherently attuned towards identifying power dynamics and the social functions of a given discourse, a queer-oriented lens will guide this project to actively challenge the assumptions unveiled by key terms and ideographs to identify with those who are not seen in this rhetoric. This effort will hopefully problematize assumptions about what constitutes success, who can contribute, and what forms of action are deemed “valuable” by illuminating the rhetorical binary both speakers employ to conflate success with action.

## **Analysis**

This analysis evaluates the key terms from both speakers’ TED Talks as they relate to discourses of success. The key terms that guide the analysis of the project were “achieve,” “emotion,” “decision,” and “contribute” in Tony Robbins’ talk, and “fine,” “want,” “stagnation,” “feel,” and “force” in Mel Robbins’ talk. Throughout this section, key terms will appear in italics, while clustering terms will appear in “quotations.” A full table featuring all the key and clustering terms identified in this study can be found in Appendix A. The data is represented as a table in order to assert a direct relationship between the key and clustering terms identified during the study. The clustering terms are divided into subsets of the key terms, and each subset is identified as a theme to clarify the relationship between the clustering terms within it. For example, the clustering terms “need”, “force” and “action” are all identified by the theme

“internal impetus.” The themes were also positioned as subsets of the key terms as well to illuminate how the key terms are understood, both in the context of this project and beyond. The division of the key terms into subsets of themes and clustering terms intends to demonstrate how the clustering terms contribute individually and collectively to the key terms and hence the rhetorical representation of success and productivity in the artifacts. By examining the key terms, this study identifies the objectives defined by success-oriented rhetoric, the prescribed path for attaining these objectives, the individual and collective purpose such objectives serve, and how eventually attaining success can have a “transformative” impact on one’s ability to fulfill societal expectations and hence attain acceptance. The speakers’ emphasis and characterization of key terms such as *change*, *want*, *feel*, and *achieve* demonstrate how these talks create and reinforce expectations about success, how it may be attained, and who may be recognized as successful by the social order.

*Objectives of Success: What Are We Working Towards?*

Both videos suggest that the objective of success-oriented rhetoric is achievement. The term *achieve*, specifically functions as a key term in T. Robbin’s talk and can be understood as an individual’s use of resources and internal will to accomplish an objective. The specific objectives T. Robbins envisions (see table 1) relate to tangible ideals, specifically money as an indicator of value, material wealth and social status; the body as an indicator of beauty, attractiveness, and physical health; and family as an indication of social bonding and acceptance. M. Robbins outlines similar objectives through the key term *want*, as the clustering terms in Table 2 relate to the areas in which M. Robbins claims her audience seeks improvements. The term “income” relates directly to her audience’s financial objectives and requirements, reinforcing the connection between material wealth, value, and success. The term “love” relates

to connection and emotional intimacy, indicating an impulse to connect with others. M. Robbins's use of the term specifically has a romantic connotation, which presents connection and intimacy as something to pursue and strive towards rather than cultivate. The terms *weight* and *healthy* both invoke a specific, weight-oriented understanding of physical fitness in relation to attractiveness, as illustrated by M. Robbins's example of someone seeking to lose "manboobs" to "hook up with somebody" (02:28-02:32). From these key terms, we can establish the strong rhetorical association of success with wealth, intimacy, and physical attractiveness. This association is important as it reveals how our discursive understanding of success is reliant upon tangible albeit superficial benchmarks. The emphasis on wealth specifically alludes to Chaput's characterization of value as a metric of neoliberal discourse often used to appraise individual and collective identities and actions.

The discursive emphasis on physical and empirical criteria causes both speakers' rhetoric to exclude individuals from success based on their ability to pursue these objectives. The emphasis on wealth reinforces the discursive construct of value as a mode of appraising activity in relation to material objects and financial capital. As Chaput suggests, an individual's ability to be viewed as successful is contingent upon the value he or she is perceived to have produced and can contribute to a broader collective (13). Therefore, wealth serves as an explicit mode of measuring the value of an individual's labor and expected capacity to contribute. Meanwhile, the emphasis on the body implicitly marginalizes those who do not adhere to particular beauty standards, explicitly indicating that specific physical features (e.g., "manboobs") are not physically attractive. This impression also significantly implies that factors such as one's health and physical appearance exist within the individual's control and are thus a matter of individual choice—an ableist implication that marginalizes those with genetic or other impairments that

may not be transformed by placing oneself “on a treadmill” (M. Robbins 02:24-02:27). The representation of intimacy meanwhile relates to one’s ability to relate to others in both romantic and community-oriented context, implying that social acceptance can be assessed by objective factors such as the length and products of a relationship, and can therefore serve as criteria for success. Through the terms that cluster around *achieve*, the two videos present a neoliberal and implicitly ableist view of what all individuals, regardless of circumstance, body shape or physical ability, are expected to accomplish to achieve success.

*Personal and Collective Obligations: Success for Whose Purpose?*

In addition to outlining the tangible objectives that contemporary success-oriented discourses establish, the two TED talks also emphasize the purpose for pursuing these objectives. M. Robbins asserts that our pursuit of success is intrinsic and constructed upon self-interest, as indicated by the key term *want* in her talk and its corresponding clustering terms “selfish” and “me” (see Table 2). The cluster term, “selfish” implies that those who strive toward the aforementioned objectives of health and physical beauty act in their own best interests and not at the coercion of a broader social order. By encouraging her audience to be “selfish” and focus on their own desires, even if they do not “sound good to other people,” (M. Robbins 02:08-02:22), M. Robbins presents these objectives as physiological and psychological needs, suggesting that individuals are biologically and mentally inclined toward pursuing these ideals in the interest of their own survival. This insinuation is reinforced by the clustering term “me,” asserting that all striving is for the individual’s own benefit. These terms ultimately suggest that a successful individual has desires, while also intimating how an individual is expected to feel about pursuing these ideals.

Despite acknowledging the self-interest inherent in the pursuit of success, T. Robbins asserts that the pursuit of success serves a broader, collective purpose. T. Robbins acknowledges that successful individuals can “achieve too” (21:06-21:07) for their own sake, and that people do act in their own self-interest. However, whereas M. Robbins encourages her audience to pursue success for the sole purpose of their own self-interest, T. Robbins rejects constant indulgence of self-interest as “bullshit at times,” asserting that we do not act in our self-interest “all the time” (1:21-1:26). This rejection of self-interest as an exclusive influence implies the existence of a wider, collective interest, which is illustrated in T. Robbins’s talk through the key term *contribute*.

T. Robbins’s effort to view individuals as members of a broader collective of social beings is exemplified by the initial category of clustering terms around *contribute*, which relate specifically to connection. Terms such as “intersect” and “connect” point to our increased access to each other in an increasingly globalized and digitized world, including our attachments to one another as well as our increased involvement in the web of mutual social obligations resulting from it. For T. Robbins, our collective acknowledgement of such a web and our respective positions within it can allow us to “appreciate [other people] more and create the kinds of connections that can stop some of the challenges that we face today” (01:50-1:56), which T. Robbins positions as a criterion of fulfilment that enables individuals to acknowledge the value of others and feel beyond themselves. Since appreciation results from connection, according to T. Robbins, displaying appreciation allows us to recognize the motivations of others and better support their success in attaining their goals. T. Robbins presents this ability to recognize and identify with each other’s needs and motivations as “understanding,” which is not a natural result of increased access and attachment to each other but rather is facilitated only through an

individual's deliberate and concerted mobilization of emotional energy. For T. Robbins, "appreciation" and "understanding" are essential for all individuals to develop, given the enduring social obligation we all have towards one another.

The enduring social obligation that "appreciation" and "understanding" allow us to recognize is the focus of the second category of terms that cluster around *contribute*, as T. Robbins compels his audience to envision success as a means of having "something to give of value," (13:39-13:40) to a broader collective. T. Robbins presents the broader social order as "calling" upon individuals to exert themselves for a broader collective benefit. By responding to this calling, individuals in T. Robbins's view may "touch" others, which he characterizes as "beautiful" for both the impact that contribution has upon the recipient as well as the individual contributing. T. Robbins's emphasis upon the individual's connection to other individuals and the broader social order contrasts significantly with M. Robbins's recommendation that her audience "be selfish" and limit their understanding of success to the scope of their own desires. However, his emphasis on individual achievement and the nature of his platform, may also suggest his view that an individual who is perceived to have contributed significantly to the broader collective may be viewed as inherently successful, a notion that can serve to perpetuate success as privileged position and undermine any efforts to criticize the successful. Despite asserting that the true benefit of success is the ability to contribute towards and support a broader collective, T. Robbins' representation of this contribution reinforces the binary relationship between success and failure in his refusal to acknowledge the disparity in contributions and the privileges they confer.

This distinction between the speakers' rhetoric regarding the nature of success reveals the volatility of success as a discursive concept and its relation to the social order. As success is

oriented around value, the two conflicting attitudes present different understandings of how an individual's success benefits a broader collective. Whereas M. Robbins asserts that individuals may demonstrate their value through the mere nature of their success and attainment of an unlimited potential, implying that the social order can only endure if individuals pursue externally imposed objectives of material wealth and physical attraction. T. Robbins meanwhile asserts that success is an active effort to support and maintain a social order. These conflicting understandings of the value of given activities and decisions presents significant challenges for the individual who seeks to achieve success as neither speaker offers significant insight into how one may navigate conflicting individual and societal impulses. Therefore, without a coherent mechanism by which to reconcile multiple, at times incompatible, standards of success that are justified in a rhetorical ecology that elevates and celebrates success by any means, the individual who dwells at the center of these standards can therefore perpetually be deemed as unsuccessful for failing to satisfy one of these standards. This constant prospect of failure hence pressures many to strive to satisfy multiple standards simultaneously avoid the stigma of failure, even when doing so may present significant challenges or may not even be feasible.

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or acknowledging the inequity used to sustain it. These conflicting understandings of the value of given activities and decisions presents significant challenges for the individual who seeks to achieve success as neither speaker offers significant insight into how one may navigate conflicting individual and societal impulses. Therefore, without a coherent mechanism by which to reconcile multiple, at times incompatible, standards of success that are justified in a rhetorical ecology that elevates and celebrates success by any means, the individual who dwells at the center of these standards can therefore perpetually be deemed as unsuccessful for failing to satisfy one of these standards. This constant prospect of failure hence pressures many to strive to satisfy multiple standards simultaneously avoid the stigma of failure, even when doing so may present significant challenges or may not even be feasible.

*Emotion and Feelings: How to Arrive at Success?*

Once they define the objectives that the successful strive to accomplish, M. Robbins and T. Robbins both identify affect as an internal force to master and restrain to achieve success. T. Robbins characterizes affect as emotion, which he defines as a “force of life” (01:04-01:06) and a “defining factor” (6:04-6:06) in whether individuals achieve major aspirations. This characterization is reinforced by the clustering terms surrounding *emotion* that relate to action. This category of clustering terms (see table 1) allows T. Robbins to present emotion as a tangible medium that allows one to actively pursue one’s capacity to succeed. Both speakers elaborate upon this capacity within their respective talks. In T. Robbins’ talk, terms relating to capacity cluster around *emotion*, specifically where he describes “emotional fitness” and “psychological strength” (09:06-09:08). This emphasis on “fitness” and “strength” are an ableist conception of emotional mastery by explicitly asserting that one requires fitness and strength to harness their

emotions and generously assumes that anyone can harness these traits to accomplish anything that can be imagined.

T. Robbins' representation of emotion as a form of fitness is illustrated by his emphasis on "resourcefulness," which he characterizes as "human emotion," as the defining factor of individual performance (06:04-06:11). For T. Robbins, an individual's capacity to achieve is determined not by access to specific resources, but rather, an ability to (re)orient emotional energy towards an objective. A vivid example of this is exemplified by the clustering term "Supreme Court," which Robbins uses to address unsuccessful presidential candidate Al Gore. When Gore cites the Supreme Court as a factor that prevented him from attaining his goal, the presidency, Robbins alludes to the "profound" emotion Gore displayed in a previous speech, asserting that had Gore accessed and oriented this emotional energy towards his campaign he would have "beat [George W. Bush's] ass and won" (06:18-06:22) without requiring the Supreme Court's intervention. This example illustrates Robbins' refusal to recognize any deficit of resources as a legitimate obstacle to success, a refusal that characterizes his view that emotion and one's ability and willingness to harness it, serves as the sole criteria of success.

Whereas T. Robbins recognizes affect as a source of strength, M. Robbins represents affect, which she calls *feelings* in her talk, as a hindrance to one's success. While T. Robbins views *emotion* as a driving factor, M. Robbins believes that *feelings* are "screwing" individuals by preventing them from attaining what they want (M. Robbins 17:27-17:27). As indicated in Table 2, one category of clustering terms connects *feelings* with inhibition. M. Robbins's specific claim, "if you listen to how you feel when it comes to what you want—you will not get it. Because you will never feel like it" (M. Robbins 17:33-17:41) vividly illustrates how these clustering terms create this sentiment of inhibition. The terms "not" and "never" specifically

portray feelings as barriers that guarantee that one will not attain a goal. When considered in context of the clustering terms, M. Robbins' characterization of *feelings* contrasts significantly from T. Robbins' characterization of *emotion*. Whereas *emotion* is comprised of forces that propel the individual towards action, achievement, and hence, success, *feelings* are explicit obstacles the individual needs to transcend to have any hope of acquiring success.

One instance that illustrates the artifacts' contrasting representation of affect regarding success is how each speaker represents capacity. T. Robbins' emphasis on "fitness" and "resourcefulness" in relation to *emotion* demonstrates a view that affect allows the individual to access the capacity that allows them to attain a given objective. Since T. Robbins identifies human emotion specifically as a "defining factor," his view is that the concerted manipulation of emotional energy can allow "anyone" to succeed at "anything." Although M. Robbins discusses capacity in relation to *want*, she shares T. Robbins' belief that individuals possess an unlimited potential to accomplish and succeed. For M. Robbins, accomplishment is simple and accessible as there are no limits to what and how much can be accomplished. M. Robbins asserts her audience can accomplish "whatever" goal they set for themselves and achieve "everything" they desire, especially as they have all the information, connections and "free tools online" that allow them to do "whatever the heck [they] want" (04:17-04:27). If there are no constraints on what can feasibly be accomplished and no limit to how much can be accomplished, the issue for M. Robbins is not determining how to help individuals best attain their goals but rather understanding why individuals are not taking advantage of their seemingly limitless capacity for accomplishment. . Similar to T. Robbins, M. Robbins applies her vision of capacity to all individuals, effectively marginalizing anyone who would be unable to strive towards a seemingly limitless capacity because of physical or mental limitations. By implicitly assuming that all

individuals possess the same boundless capacity, M. Robbins positions responsibility for success on the individual, therefore providing the social order license to stigmatize those who do not attain its ideation of success.

Through her presentation of capacity as universally accessible to the extent of being “simple,” M. Robbins inflicts significant stigma upon her audience. The impact of this stigma may be felt most acutely by those unable to strive as she envisions due to physical or mental impairment. However, it also generally applies to all individuals who have supposedly failed to accomplish goals that she represents as “simple” and unequivocally accessible. Whereas T. Robbins characterizes affect as an emotional force that one must cultivate in order propel themselves toward achieving a significant objective, M. Robbins characterizes affect as something that is “screwing” the individual by offering them a pretext for not accessing a supposedly infinite capacity to succeed. For M. Robbins, those who fail are those who listen to how they *feel* and are, hence, actively choosing not to succeed.

The different clustering terms demonstrate the contrasting attitudes the two speakers possess towards emotion as a medium for success, which suggests the diminished, marginalized representation of emotion within the broader rhetoric of success. T. Robbins associates emotion with action to distinguish it from “intellect,” which comprises another category of clustering terms as featured in Table 1. Although T. Robbins recognizes the value of intellect, he asserts that it is not “what’s driving” his audience’s actions. T. Robbins further juxtaposes emotion and intellect, stating that one can “know something intellectually and then not use it, not apply it” (04:37-04:40). This juxtaposition presents intellectual vision and effort as abstract and theoretical, while emotion is active and applied. This impression is reinforced by the clustering term “think,” which T. Robbins presents as a skill all individuals share. Although T. Robbins

asserts that thinking allows individuals to “rationalize anything” and “make anything happen” (01:12-01:16) he believes that such capacity is only feasible beyond the intellectual realm, where the forces that are “driving you” exist (01:38-01:40). T. Robbins also uses “force” to characterize emotion as an internal entity that acts upon an individual’s decisions to pursue given paths. Robbins’s representation of emotion as a force implies that the individual is an object being acted upon unless he or she can recognize these forces and manipulate them. Meanwhile, for M. Robbins, the only path towards success is transcending feelings through determination and will power, an ableist assumption of her audience’s mental health capacities.

Despite holding different views regarding whether affect should be embraced or resisted, both speakers place a significant emphasis on action, which they both use to subjugate and diminish anything that does not directly contribute to performance. T. Robbins diminishes and invalidates thought, specifically thought interrogating exploitation and structural privileges, since it obstructs action, and he only values *emotion* as a means of success as far as it relates to action. M. Robbins meanwhile regards *feelings* as a direct hazard to performance that needs to be overcome by her audience to experience success. Despite these differing views, both speakers represent a discourse that diminishes thoughts and emotions as intangible and therefore of no value in a culture that emphasizes performance and tangible results. This impression significantly marginalizes those who may struggle to achieve due to mental health challenges, since the discursive emphasis on action and performance prevents these very challenges from even being acknowledged. Therefore, both speakers create a binary that conflates success with action and failure with inaction, a binary so rigid that it prevents a large group of individuals, specifically those with physical or mental disability, as unsuccessful by merit of a limited, neoliberal understanding of action.

Although M. Robbins and T. Robbins disagree about affect's role in success, they both believe that managing and regulating affect is crucial to help one attain success. Both M. Robbins and T. Robbins associate affect with the human condition, and more specifically, our basic needs, to varying degrees. T. Robbins identifies need as being either psychological or spiritual, while M. Robbins more explicitly identifies needs in relation to biological impulses for sustenance and procreation. However, T. Robbins specifically views emotion as a vehicle by which we can meet our needs if we identify them and orient our emotional efforts towards them. Conversely, M. Robbins asserts that we must transcend our feelings to fulfill our need for exploration.

Despite these differences of values, both speakers view emotion as something to manage, manipulate, and transcend through sheer decision and willpower, once again generously assuming their audience's mental capacity for such effort. This assumption stigmatizes those unable to exert such restraint and mental effort by depicting their inability as the opposite of success and, hence, as failure, creating an oppressive, if limiting discursive binary.

*Exertion, Decision and Active Effort: How to Translate Affect into Success*

Once the speakers emphasize affect as needing restraint to attain success, they outline how the individual, through agency and willpower, may manage emotional energy. T. Robbins asserts that emotional energy may be regulated through *decision*, which he defines as "the ultimate power." The clustering terms surround *decision* describe it as an application of agency around an external stimulus (Table 2). T. Robbins acknowledges that agency can be an acquiescence to a situation or given ideology, as the clustering term "bought" suggests. Robbins's use of the term "bought" early in his talk to characterize his audience's assumed rejection of a "therapy culture" (04:18-04:20) indicates a pejorative representation of choice. In

this instance, accepting “the mindset that we are our past,” (04:22-04:24) explicitly rejects a supposedly passive acknowledgement and identification with external circumstances as inhibitory and antithetical to achievement and success. T. Robbins uses “bought” to indicate an uninformed acceptance of what he presents as an illegitimate belief by implying that his primary audience at the TED conference would not be “in this room” (04:25-04:26) if they accepted or “bought” the notion of how individuals embody past experiences. T. Robbins highlights his audience’s presence at a conference reputed for critical inquiry as an active challenge, if not a flagrant dismissal of an understanding of the past that, in his view, does not engender success.

Whereas “bought” functions as a deliberate, albeit uninformed, exercise of poor judgement, the other active verbs in the cluster represent an effort to confront ideologies and define circumstance. This is exemplified by the term “shape,” which T. Robbins uses in reference to an individual molding and determining a path towards an objective. This is illustrated by the phrase “decisions shape destiny,” (07:33-07:37) which implies that the decisions the individual takes, and by extension the individual in question, has the sole authority to determine the course of future events, regardless of external forces. In addition to destiny, T. Robbins asserts that individuals may shape themselves and their culture in an enduring way through their decisions. As Table 1 indicates, T. Robbins believes that the individual can shape internal factors, such as relationships with the past and career trajectory, and external factors such as the courses of history and culture. This sentiment is reinforced by the clustering term “power,” and Robbin’s assertion that decision functions as its ultimate expression. Robbins’ representation of decision as the ultimate power is significant as it subjugates external factors that impact individual performance, placing the primary authority and thus responsibility for action, upon the individual. This strategy allows Robbins to create a highly individual and

action-oriented model of how one can function in a social order and accomplish important personal and collective goals.

Therefore, T. Robbins positions shaping as the primary, if not exclusive, force that not only determines the individual's character and model of the world "long term," (09:51-09:53) but also molds every one of the social and external ecosystems these individual traits inhabit. Another clustering term, "do," reinforces the emphasis on active agency by positioning action and how it results from decision making as an inherent quality of human nature and human existence. This effort to present action as a consequence of decision, which in turn is influenced by emotion, is reflected in the talk's title "Why We Do What We Do." T. Robbins asserts the connection between emotion action and decision, stating that "an emotion then creates what we are going to do, the action" (7:56-7:59). Thus, in the context of T. Robbins's talk, the decision is not whether to act but how to manipulate and harness the emotional forces we experience towards success. T. Robbins's emphasis upon *decision* as a deliberate means of managing emotion and asserting will presents success as action oriented. In addition to positioning emotion as a force that can be used to justify actions, including problematic ones, provided they result in success, T. Robbins also creates an implicit rhetorical binary in which the successful are those who act, while the unsuccessful are those who act not.

Whereas T. Robbins emphasizes *decision*, and hence agency, as a primary means of regulating emotion and exerting will towards success, M. Robbins characterizes such regulation and exertion as a conscious, concerted exercise of discipline, which is represented in her talk by the key term *force*. As Table 2 suggests, *force* is the deliberate act of self-regulation that allows one to transcend internal barriers and presumably attain success. M. Robbins use of the terms "parent," "push," and "make," specifically indicate the individual's need to self-regulate by

consciously monitoring themselves and restraining impulses for their own benefit. This notion is exemplified in M. Robbins' characterization of parenting oneself as "mak[ing] yourself do the crap you don't want to do so you can become everything that you're supposed to be" (12:11-12:20). Thus, whereas T. Robbins assumes that action is a default mode of individual functioning, M. Robbins implies that individuals are only capable of acting through a concerted, deliberate application of energy against their immediate impulses.

M. Robbins believes that success comes not from using understanding to augment our tendency towards action, but rather from defying our tendency towards inaction. When M. Robbins describes the "activation energy required to get your ass away from your computer and out the front door, to go on the walk, you said that you were going to go on," (11:34- 11:45) and the "force" needed to "push yourself out of a warm bed and into a cold room," (11:47-11:53), she vividly illustrates how individuals are naturally inclined towards inaction and therefore need tremendous internally generated willpower to coerce themselves to act and succeed. Without "parenting" ourselves, M. Robbins suggests that we "won't ever, not now, not then, not ever!" (13:01-13:06) defy our inclination towards inertia. M. Robbins's characterization of force suggests that success is a deliberate, rather than passive application of willpower to pursue our best interests despite our impulses otherwise. In addition to assuming a maternalistic and patronizing tone, this characterization reinforces T. Robbins' conflation of action with success by implicitly stigmatizing those who fail as lacking the foresight and willpower to "push" themselves.

Although T. Robbins and M. Robbins present two different understandings of action in relation to emotion, they both suggest that manipulating affect is an individual choice for which one can be held personally responsible. For T. Robbins, success involves deciding to apply one's

internal emotional energy to shape any and every internal and external stimulus one encounters regardless of size or scope. Meanwhile, M. Robbins maintains that success is an active decision to resist our inherent tendencies towards delay and inaction and hence value success over comfort. Both speakers, despite their differences, present success as a conscious decision to act, meaning that those who fail to succeed do so not because of fortune, circumstance, or any other limiting factor, but rather because they have actively refused to pursue the actions and behaviors that guarantee success. This sentiment reinforces the notion that everyone is capable of success by conflating success with activity. This conflation is problematic since it offers no opportunity to envision the extent to which an activity may be a source of harm to others, which may be used to justify and reinforce oppressive and exploitative practices within a social order. Further, the association between activity and success stigmatizes inaction and those who are incapable of attaining these ideas due to circumstance or disability by implying that anyone who does not attain success has chosen not to act towards it.

*Transformation Against Stagnation: The Supposed Impact of Success*

In addition to outlining goals, linking success to affect, and visualizing how an individual may become successful through intrinsically generated determination and will-power, M. Robbins and T. Robbins explore the impacts of deciding to pursue the path to success they describe. Beyond the external, tangible goals they emphasize, both speakers represent transformation and change as the desired effect that success has upon the individual. Despite emphasizing wealth, health, and external acceptance as ideal indicators of success, T. Robbins acknowledges that these milestones in and of themselves are not the primary objective, as individuals may often attain a desire and think “is this all there is?” (10:11-10:13). Rather than external benchmarks, both speakers emphasize transformation as the defining attribute of a

successful individual. In T. Robbins's talk, "change" exists as a cluster term around *decision*, relating specifically to the individual's exercise of will. For T. Robbins, change is something an individual "makes" consciously and can only be executed by a deliberate decision to comprehend and manipulate one's emotions and internal impulses.

M. Robbins, meanwhile, places a greater emphasis on *change*, which functions as a cluster term in her talk. While she agrees with T. Robbins's assertion that change is an active process requiring deliberate action, she posits that a result of said action is discovery and that those who experience change are more receptive to new ideas and experiences. M. Robbins describes the ideas that individuals can envision as "life-changing" and hence worth the effort of executing. She also asserts that exploration is not simply a desired effect, but rather a need "of the soul," (16:46-16:49) that can only be fulfilled by "forcing yourself to be uncomfortable" (16:52-16:56). T. Robbins shares M. Robbins' view that transformation is a fundamental individual need, asserting that individuals who do not experience constant growth "feel like hell" (13:34-13:36). This emphasis on change and exploration heavily stigmatizes those who are weary of or unable to pursue discomfoting risks or are perceived as favoring the status quo.

Furthermore, M. Robbins exemplifies this stigma in her description of those who characterize themselves as "fine." M. Robbins views the word "fine" with disdain since she associates it with deliberate inaction as many individuals who claim to be fine are, "genius. Because if you're fine, you don't have to do anything about it" (5:37- 5:38). As mentioned earlier, M. Robbins believes that individuals are predisposed towards inaction, a predisposition she maintains is not only an active choice but a source of harm. T. Robbins does asset the need for perpetual development and growth in all areas of life, M. Robbins is more explicit in the consequences of those who fail to disrupt their predisposition towards inaction. For M. Robbins,

those who do not seek to disrupt their routines are “dissatisfied,” and “bored.” She further asserts that those who do not pursue transformation “torture” themselves and allow routine to “kill” them (15:41-15:43). These terms imply that those who do not select success and apply the force and energy M. Robbins outlines are not simply depriving themselves of an opportunity to succeed but are also actively and intentionally contributing to their own harm and destruction. This implication further reinforces the binary between success and failure by implying that transformation is necessary and a choice, and that those who choose not to act and transform themselves are acting against success, thereby stigmatizing a large group of individuals with no consideration of external factors. This emphasis on change and stigmatization serve to create a limited, perpetually shifting, and unstable concept of success.

*Multimodal Considerations: Visual Aids, Interaction, and Discursive Proliferation*

Although an emphasis on textual features illustrates the limited, binary conception of success and its relation to action, these impressions are also reinforced and augmented by the artifacts’ multimodal components. Although an analysis of spatial, and gestural modalities may offer significant insight into how the speakers articulate their binary conception of success, this project will focus extensively on the visual aspects of the two talks. The visuals support both speakers in materializing concepts for their audience, and thus, present compelling arguments. Further, the medium of the online video amplifies the visual components relied on during the talks, reinforcing their impact and inviting an opportunity to examine them with further scrutiny. Both speakers rely on visual elements to emphasize central ideas in their work. T. Robbins employs extended quotes and diagrams that assert the relationship between ideas, such as his model distinguishing the situational and long-term patterns relating to “invisible forces” (see figure 1). The text-oriented visual aids serve to reinforce the key terms within T. Robbins’ talk,

such as a slide presenting *achievement* as one of the “master lessons of life,” (see figure 2) which reinforces achievement as an explicit criterion of success. During T. Robbins’s presentation, the slides appear on screen for nearly seven seconds in the video of his presentation before the camera returns its focus to T. Robbins, suggesting that the slides, while reinforcing key ideas, primarily are intended to reinforce ideas for the immediate audience he addresses at the conference and not the audience viewing the presentation online.

Unlike T. Robbins, M. Robbins places more emphasis on her textual slides, as exemplified in her representation of the term “fine” to reinforce her discussion (see figure 3). M. Robbins also employs a flashing five second timer on the screen, which counts down from 5 to 1 (see figure 4). In addition to reinforcing her discussion of the “five second rule” that individuals need to “marry” an action to an idea within five seconds to eschew inertia and “pull[ing] the emergency break” (19:21- 19:26), the timer creates a kairotic sense of urgency by representing the limited temporal scope in which humans can act, thereby reinforcing the binary relationship that conflates success with action. Additionally, this implied urgency encourages immediate, decisive action, which marginalizes those who are incapable of swift, impulsive performance by implying that individuals’ main objective is to act to transcend their inertia rather than actively reflect upon their skillsets and limitation. These numbers also reinforce M. Robbins’s elevation of action over inaction by reinforcing the assumption that any action toward a goal contributes to progress and change and is, thus, preferable to deliberate inaction, disregarding any such risk that may arise from impulse. In creating a sense of urgency, M. Robbins positions the responsibility for actions, and hence success, upon the individual by implying that one may only succeed by acting quickly. This instance demonstrates how online media supplement the creation of a binary between success and failure by presenting a limited, albeit compelling, simulation of individual

decision making wherein one either claims success through swift action or is not deemed successful. The limited nature of this simulation reduces success into a pair of exaggerated options, obscuring the nuances of decision making and stigmatizing those who choose not to act, or fail to do so quickly enough. While the discursive elements of the artifacts impact how we represent success, their multimodal aspects are integral in modeling our conception of a success-oriented mindset and preparing us to stigmatize those without one.

In addition to textual materials, both speakers employ photographic images to supplement their presentations. T. Robbins uses images of Tiananmen Square, Rosa Parks, and Lance Armstrong to reinforce his assertion that “decision is the ultimate power” (04:42-04:44) and the “history of our world” (08:31-08:34). These iconic images contribute another dimension to Robbins’s claim by evoking a collective knowledge of monumental and transformative events in the United States and global history. The images of Rosa Parks (see figure 5) and the protestor at Tiananmen Square (see figure 6) allude to a narrative of an individually initiated, globalized effort towards justice, freedom, and equality that reinforces the transformative impact of individual action. The image of Lance Armstrong (see figure 7), whom T. Robbins discusses in relation to “emotional fitness” and “psychological strength,” meanwhile illuminates the unbridled potential of the individual to transcend all challenges despite physical barriers. These images persuade audiences to view themselves within a broader historical lineage of accomplishment, achievement, and societal transformation and embrace the inflated labor and societal expectations placed upon them.

While T. Robbins employs photographic visuals to illustrate our capacity for success and encourage action, M. Robbins uses a photograph of an individual with his eyes closed in bed tapping the snooze button of an alarm clock to illustrate how our inclination toward inaction

stifles our capacity (see figure 8). This image reinforces M. Robbins's assertion that individuals are naturally inclined toward inaction by illustrating her suggestion that many individuals, when given the initial opportunity to act when waking up, defer to inaction of "hit[ting] the snooze" (9:16-9:18) and remaining in bed as opposed to physically rising and engaging in their daily activities. This image is also used in juxtaposition with what M. Robbins represents as the vast unique potential individuals have given the "one in four hundred trillion" odds of their very existence. By juxtaposing this image with this statistic, M. Robbins suggests that individuals who defer towards inaction are intentionally squandering their potential toward success, thereby positioning the responsibility for success and achievement exclusively upon the individual. This image reinforces M. Robbin's representation of success as an active choice and illustrates our natural inclination toward inaction, thereby stigmatizing inaction and those who are unable to act towards the high expectations set by the broader discourse.

Another aspect of the two artifacts to consider is how their materiality allows for the broad dissemination of their rhetoric about success. Although both talks were initially delivered before live audiences at private conference settings, they now exist on online video sharing platforms for public use and consumption. The artifacts exist on both YouTube and the TED website, where they may be liked and shared and added to a customized playlist created by the individual user. The user's ability to access and distribute this content electronically by visiting a website or selecting a link permits this content to proliferate across a wide discursive setting with ease as indicated by the 28 million and 29 million views M. Robbins and T. Robbins' talks have upon the TED platform, respectively. The accessibility offered by the online video can be explained in part by Marshall McLuhan's rhetorical tetrad, which outlines the different ways media impact the circulation of rhetorical messages. One specific component of the tetrad that

relates to this increased access is amplification, which indicates the attributes of an object's communicative ability that it augments (Reinwald 185). The objects in this instance, online videos, augment accessibility through the ease with which individuals may access and distribute their content to others by copying links and posting to social media. The accessibility of the videos can transcend national and linguistic boundaries as exemplified by the multiple translations of these talks' transcripts available on the TED website. The significant access individuals have to these materials through the internet also demonstrates the capacity of this rhetoric to disseminate and circulate rapidly across a wide discursive context, a capacity reinforced by algorithms that automatically recommend content and curate a feed based on past interests (Ridolfo & DeVoss). The internet allows the limited, action-oriented understanding of success to proliferate and, in doing so, establishes an enduring cultural understanding of work and success. Therefore, these materials that incentivize action while stigmatizing inaction capitalize on a platform that ensures this binary endures within our discourse and continues to comprise our contemporary understanding of success, regardless of the marginalizing impacts.

### *Implications of Findings*

Both videos are explicit in characterizing success in terms of external, empirical criteria, particularly in terms of personal wealth and professional validation, which are regarded highly by the social order. In elevating career and income as attributes of success, both videos reinforce Ramage's view that the perception of success is founded on labor by applying the image of the "self-reliant but absolutely subservient worker" (51) to a modern context. Further, despite the artifacts' divergent representations of emotion, both speakers nonetheless employ a highly restrictive understanding of affect by relating it to success. In viewing emotion exclusively in relation to success as either an empowering avenue or inhibiting obstacle, the speakers

effectively marginalize emotional experiences that do not yield a definitive outcome, limiting how individuals can understand themselves and their emotions. In promoting the image of the ideal worker and diminishing the significance of emotional experiences to their immediate, tangible impact, the two artifacts reinforce the oppressive system of high labor expectations Daniel describes. This effect augments the likelihood of burnout by limiting our ability to articulate and recognize it. The speakers' depiction of high labor expectations as accessible not only offers a justification for the social order to demand more from its workers, but also places the option and responsibility for success exclusively on the individual, insinuating that those who succeed have only done so by choice.

It is also worth noting that while the multimodal components of these talks, such as their visual features and the rapid distribution allowed by their platform, render the videos more accessible to a broader audience, the content of the talks themselves maintain a limited and exclusionary view of success and those who may be considered successful. The rhetorical binary used to separate the successful from their counterparts marginalizes those unable to succeed by almost entirely disregarding the external individual and structural factors that also contribute to success, and thus absolves the social order of nearly any obligation to these individuals' wellbeing. This binary has significant implications for the rhetoric relating to how our social order represents and addresses individuals with disabilities, as Miron, Siebers, Kerschbaum and Johnson suggest.

Furthermore, the implicit assumption that success is voluntary will be foundational to scholars attempting to address the rhetoric surrounding the representation and assimilation of immigrants, as Keohane and Miron suggest, and analyze the nature of debates relating to labor regulations, public assistance programs, and the need for a social safety net. This binary also has

implications for scholars studying mental health rhetoric, specifically those aiming to extend Daniel's research into burnout, its origins, and the strategies presented to address it. In essence, the findings for this study have an impact to influence conversations of what and how much the social order may expect from us, and whether the rhetorical ecology has the capacity to represent or even acknowledge our complex individual needs.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of the two artifacts demonstrates a binary relationship between success and failure moderated nearly exclusively by action. As action-oriented terms such as *force* and *achieve* suggest, achievement is an active process, requiring an individual's deliberate decision to regulate and optimize their emotional impulses in pursuit of an objective valued by their social order (e.g., material wealth, physical attractiveness, and beauty). Although the speakers disagree as to whether affect is primarily empowering or inhibiting, they both present it as something to actively manipulate and shape, ignoring and stigmatizing those afflicted by mental health challenges by assuming all individuals unequivocally possess this capacity. Both speakers present the management of affect as a deliberate exercise of will performed in one's own individual and societal interest—one that, while difficult, is nonetheless within reach of all willing to exert the effort. This understanding ascribes responsibility for success exclusively to the individual by asserting that the ability to attain goals is entirely within their control, while also stigmatizing those who have not attained success. Such logic does not acknowledge if effort is as universal as the speakers suggest. Rather, the speakers stigmatize inaction by presenting it as a decision not to pursue the material and psychological benefits of success, such as the discovery and exploration that result from change. Although the speakers express conflicting sentiments as to whether success is primarily individual or collectively oriented, they both agree

that by failing, individuals are not only harming themselves by opting for *stagnation*, which M. Robbins associates with harm and dissatisfaction, but also the broader social order by refusing to support its beliefs and ideals. Ultimately, the speakers present success as accessible for those who want it while heavily stigmatizing those who are stifled by external factors, exerting effort without success, or reject this understanding of success entirely.

The analysis of Tony Robbins's "Why We Do What We Do," and Mel Robbins "How to Stop Screwing Yourself Over," reveals a rigid, rhetorical binary between success and failure that is appraised by action. The emphasized significance of action and agency informs the representation of the key terms in both works. Success, or *achievement*, is something one must ostensibly work towards by either acting upon *emotion* or actively disregarding *feelings*. When one *decides* to pursue success, one is acting or *forcing* themselves against a natural inclination towards inaction. If one acts, one may facilitate individual and collective *change*, or *contribute* and fulfill personal *wants*, yet if one opts not to act, they may experience the dissatisfaction and harm that are characteristic of *stagnation*. Although both speakers offer different understandings of emotion and the extent to which we should envision success as an individual or collective objective, they both present a similar message: success entails action on the part of the individual and any form of inaction is an active decision not to succeed. It is worth noting that although action is not identified as a key term in either speaker's work, its relation to the other key terms demonstrates its significance to the broader construct of success and the binary that represents it. Furthermore, Chaput's research on success implies that the efforts that may be deemed as actions towards success are appraised by the value they generate for a broader collective, meaning that any form of individual action and effort exerted that does not result in *achievement* nor produce value may not be understood as successful. Such a rigid understanding of action marginalizes the

efforts of many individuals who, due to external or systemic factors, are unable to align their efforts toward a particular objective.

The artifacts' emphasis on action also problematizes their use of capacity in addressing individual agency in pursuing goals. Both speakers diminish the significance of external obstacles and reassure their audiences that any goal is attainable with the necessary effort. This generous, if not exaggerated, representation of their audience's capacities minimizes the impact of disability or other limiting factors in an individual's effort to pursuing success, thereby creating the impression that one has not attained success by either opting not to act, or opting not to exert the demanded effort, which inflates the criteria for what may be considered action and places the ideal of success, ironically, out of reach for many. Further, the diminishing of external obstacles absolves the broader social order of responsibility for them, in effect allowing them to remain and perpetuate. Although Tony Robbins advocates that his audience envision how they may change the world, the diminished recognition of how specifically the world makes doing so difficult significantly complicates an understanding of how this may be accomplished. The speakers' use of visuals reinforces their claims is circulated widely by the online video medium, thus rendering the content accessible to large audiences of individuals and organizations who may access and disseminate these materials with tremendous ease. The accessibility of the video content illustrates the tremendous influence of the TED Talk to assert and reinforce a vision of success in a discursive ecosystem in which it is already lauded.

The speakers' emphasis on internally sustained action as the primary, if not solitary medium for success is evocative of the ideal worker Ramage describes in his book. Both talks represent a successful individual as one industrious enough to pursue external societal objectives independently with limited prompting and does so without interrogating or questioning the

broader social and economic structures that complicate this pursuit. As Chaput's model suggests, the rhetorical binary presented by these two works serves to reward the externally active, independent productive worker as valuable, while implicitly stigmatizing those who do not meet this image as unsuccessful. This stigma provides the foundation for the insufficiency that Micki McGee and other scholars assert self-help materials employ to justify their existence by presenting themselves as the solution to their audience's inability to fulfill societal expectations. The action-oriented binary that guides how the two speakers interpret success illuminates how motivational self-help media functions and its broader role in the discursive ecology of the United States. Motivational speeches such as the two examined use value as a means by which to reinforce actions that correspond with understandings of success and serve the broader social order, and stigma as a means by which to discourage any action or group of individuals whose value are not apparent. In determining which activities and individuals are valuable and hence successful, these discourses use the TED mantra of spreading ideas to justify American values regarding work and achievement by reifying them for domestic audiences discursively, while also propagating them to international ones to evaluate all individuals through these limited, economically oriented criteria.

It is also worth noting that both artifacts were created in the past decade, and hence may not reflect the more recent and emerging discourses about success. Although the messages within these videos continue to endure to some extent, recent developments suggest that their rhetorical impact is diminishing. The rampant employee turnover witnessed in the United States during the past two years in tandem with individuals reporting burnout (Leonhardt) suggest that the ideals promoted by the two artifacts and self-help rhetoric more broadly are unsustainable. This occurrence illustrates that the defining characteristics of the messages articulated by the two

TED Talks, specifically the overwhelming emphasis on action and personal responsibility, the diminished regard for external circumstances, the stigmatization of inaction to marginalize disability and mental health concerns, and the inflated depiction of capacity, are increasingly being viewed as unattainable and problematic. Thus, my analysis suggests that the concept of success represented in these videos invites further examination, and perhaps, further revision and amending. Rhetorical scholarship might identify how this rhetoric may have changed or been deployed in the years since the artifacts were produced, or how they have responded to the challenges affiliated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Rhetorical scholars might also examine how the rhetoric in these materials may be more inclusive in their messaging, or afford greater consideration of physical or mental disability, or greater understanding of broader societal obstacles. Similarly, rhetorical scholars should consider how our discourse may diminish its emphasis on economic value as an indicator of self-worth and instead view individuals as more than a commodity with a potential to generate labor. These conversations and investigations are necessary for a future in which individuals can accomplish their goals in a manner that does not result in burnout, wherein stigma does not need to be employed as a means of motivation, and the “therapy culture” T. Robbins seems to dislike can exist in a way that makes individuals feel supported as well as empowered in their ability to improve the world. Hopefully, we can contribute a discourse that appraises a society by the wellbeing of its individuals, rather than the output of its workers.

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### Appendix A: Cluster Analysis Tables

The tables below represent the relationship between key and clustering terms located during the study. The column labeled “key term” contains terms that were identified as central concepts to their respective artifacts, and the number next to each term represent the frequency with which it appeared. For example, the (5) next to *achieve* in Table 1 indicates that *achieve* appeared 5 times during “Why We Do What We Do.” It is worth noting that the frequencies derived include closely related terms, as *achievement*, for example, is recorded under *achieve*. The term *stagnation* does not possess a frequency as it serves as a combination of several recurring terms, such as “stuck,” “fine” and “nothing,” all of which are instead identified as clustering terms.

The terms in the third column, labeled “clustering terms,” document the terms that appear in close proximity to the key terms in the artifacts. As part of the cluster analysis process, the clustering terms were categorized by overarching themes, which are listed in the second column of both charts. For instance, although, “shape,” “power,” “do,” “bought,” “change,” “action,” “past,” “destiny,” “focus,” “target,” “meaning,” “career,” “difference,” “history,” and “culture” all cluster around *decision*, these terms are separated into two categories, “Shape/Impact,” and “Area of Impact.” The themes column serves to indicate the shared relationship among a subset of clustering terms and how these terms collectively signify their designated key term.

Table 1  
Key and Clustering Terms for “Why We Do What We Do”

Key Term	Themes	Clustering Terms
Achieve (5)	Objective	Body, Family, Money, Fulfillment, Significance, Important, Grow, Love
	Internal Will	Drive, Fuel, Master, Invisible, Make it happen
	Resources	Time, Resources, Supreme Court
Emotion (23)	Internal Impetus	Need, Force, Action/Active
	Capacity	Fitness, Strength, Resourcefulness, Anyone, Anything
	Thought	Beliefs, Intellect, Think
Contribute (7)	External Obligations	Difference, Give/Give back, Beyond self, Calling
	Interactions	Pain, Value, Touch Care, Connection, Intersect, Appreciate, Understand
Decision (16)	Shape/Impact	Shape, Power, Do, Bought, Change, Action
	Areas of Impact	Past, Destiny, Focus, Target, Meaning, Career, Difference, History, Culture

Table 2  
Key and Clustering Terms for “How to Stop Screwing Yourself Over”

Key Terms	Themes	Clustering Terms
Want (41)	Opportunity	Anything, Whatever, Any, Now, Want, Simple, Get, Why Don't
	Areas	Selfish, Me, Healthy, Image, Love, Weight, Need
Stagnation	Inaction	Stuck, Given Up, Nothing, Inner Snooze Button
	Complacency	Fine, Comfort, Plateau, Same, Stable, Autopilot, Routine
	Harm	Dissatisfied, Kill, Insane, Torture, Bored
Change (8)	Action	Do, Activation Energy, Action
	Investigate/Discovery	Ideas, Exploration, Experience
	Disruption	Emergency Brake, Break, Grows, Life, World, Transformation
Feel (22)	Consciousness	Alive, Experience, Signals, Really
	Inhibition	Waiting, Won't, Never, Screwing, Not
	Biological Manifestation	Motivation, Needs, Body, Food, Water, Sex, Impulses, Behavior
Force (9)	Self-Regulation	Push, Parent, Make
	Barriers	Physical, Behavior, Don't Want, Blow
	Transcendence	Outside, Uncomfortable, Activation Energy, Break

## Appendix B: Multimodal Figures

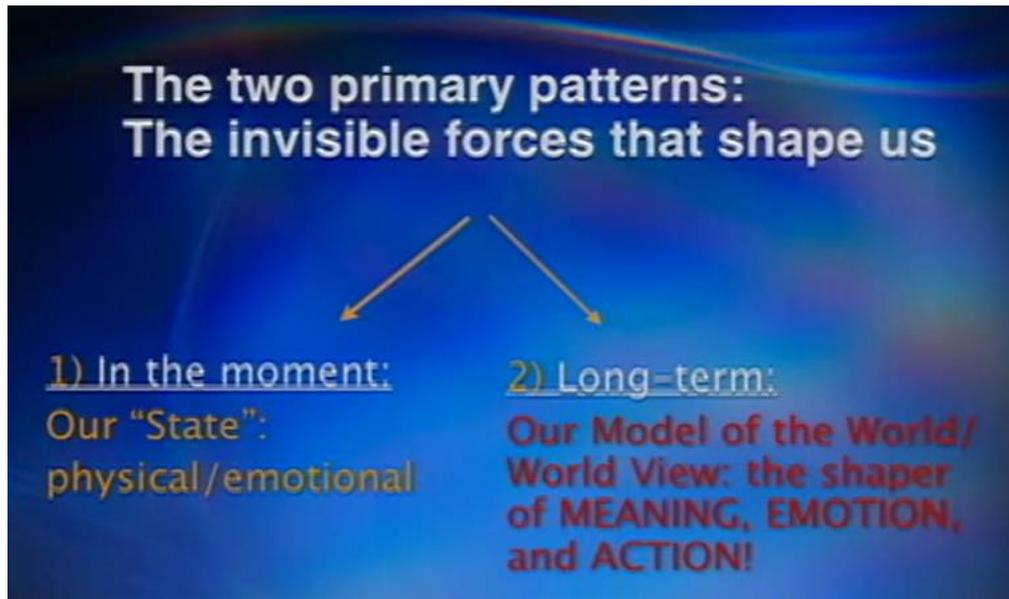


Fig. 1. Invisible Forces

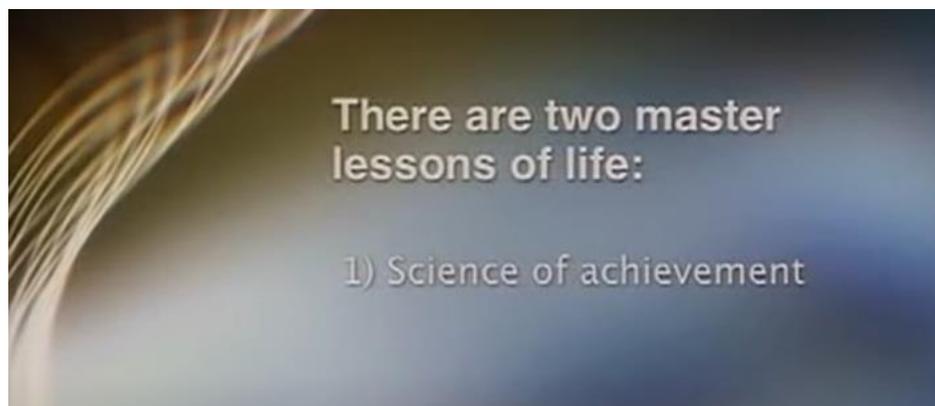


Fig. 2. Science of Achievement



**FINE**

Fig. 3. Fine



**FIVE**

**FOUR**

**THREE**

**TWO**

**ONE**

Fig. 4. Kairotic Countdown



Fig. 5. Rosa Parks



Fig. 6. Tiananmen Square Protestor



Fig. 7. Lance Armstrong



Fig. 8. Hitting the Snooze