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### Campus Prohibitions and Student “Manners” (Informal Social Control)

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## Campus Prohibitions and Student “Manners” (Informal Social Control)

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Simar Bhogal

### Introduction

Governments, Presidents, Police, Deans, Administration, RAs, Principals, Class leaders, Parents, Guardians. There are certain members of society that are assigned the responsibility to take care of their communities, protect them from harm and promote their well-being. This requires an intrinsic and thorough understanding of how the community functions and what it has adopted as its unique norms. In schools and colleges, where there is a significant generational gap between the rule makers and followers, it is common to have clefts in the way the caretakers understand the anatomy of their community’s social structure. In this case, where formal social control does not effectively wrap around its society’s jagged edges, informal social control plays an important role in how behaviors are categorized as right and wrong.

### What is social control?

In anthropology, social control is defined as the social pressure that authority figures use to influence behaviors, actions, beliefs, and movements (Helper, 2022). In 1958, Ivan Nye conducted a study to identify the three types of social control -

1. Direct control, which punishes the breaking of rules
2. Indirect control, which rewards adhering to rules
3. Internal control, in which the community’s morals prevent them from breaking rules.

Even though Nye’s research was on authority figures and formal social influence, the same applies to informal social control where anti-social behavior is punished with negative gossip and ostracization, pro-social behavior is rewarded with praise and social merit and the community’s norms influence which behaviors are considered ‘out of the ordinary’ (Muller, 2003).

At Trinity College, where I have been for one semester, there is a similar social structure and a robust unanimous understanding of informal social control. There is a disregard for campus rules that students know will not directly harm anyone as well as unspoken social rules between students that the administration does not take into consideration, which accounts for internal control. Anti-social behavior might be punished with negative gossip and exclusion from social events (Muller, 2003; Giberson, 2012; Aldeaneuva, 2022). Pro-social behavior is often rewarded by an expansion of the individuals’ social circle and acceptance. For example: despite the rules administered by admin, there is widespread use of alcohol and drugs that is normalized to the point where it is acknowledged by faculty and campus police and can be openly discussed in an academic paper, such as this. Anti-social behavior, such as being known for spreading false rumors, will result in you losing friends whereas pro-social behavior such as winning a football game, will expand your social circle. What is considered anti-social and pro-social is decided by societal norms and informal internal control.

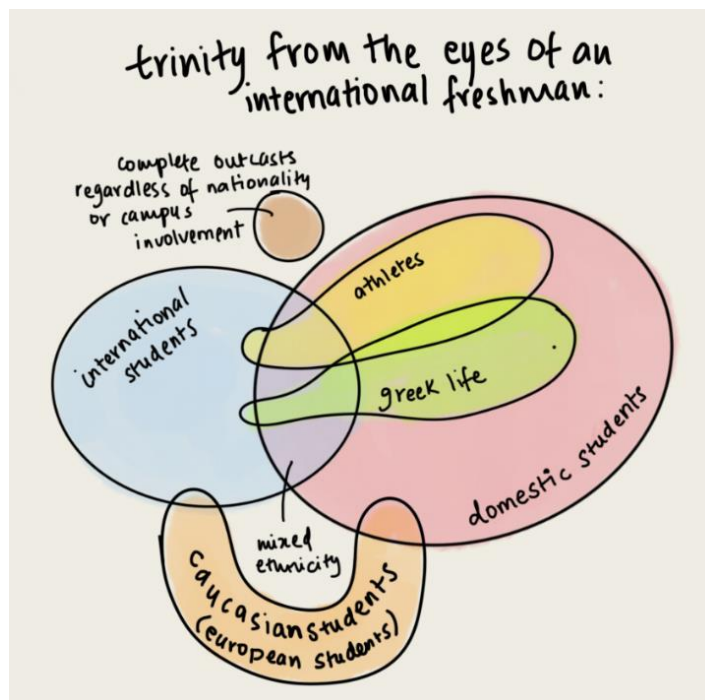
### Social structure and Trinity’s social step ladder

Muller (2003) suggests that a “close-knit” group is necessary for the prevalence of effective informal social control. This “close-knit” group isn’t necessarily characterized by the emotional proximity of the individuals in it, but by frequent and recurrent face-to-face interactions (Brown;

Muller 2003). Muller says that a close-knit group should have only a few degrees of separation between its members, where if you don't know someone, you definitely know someone else who does. This makes the community feel small and allows it to establish unspoken social norms.

It comes as a surprise that after years of social change, the social pyramid at most higher education institutes hasn't changed too much. While there is definitely a higher acceptance of minorities in terms of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and more; athletes and greek life members, especially fraternity boys, are still socially much more valuable than say, the members of the Neuroscience Club.

At Trinity, this social divide is stronger than ever. As a brown, Asian, international student, I was warned during my first week here to expect the fragmentation of domestic and international students. I was surprised to see that this wasn't an exaggeration.



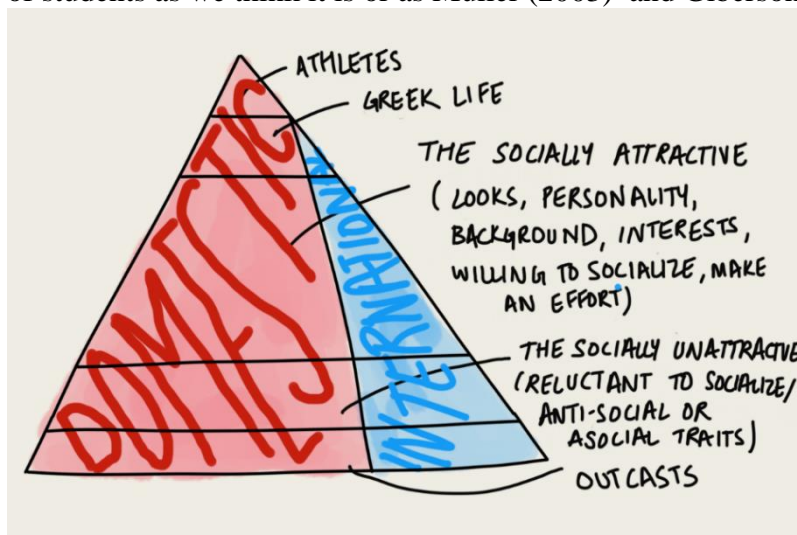
The way I see it, there are the domestic students and the international students, with the middle ground being mixed ethnicity students or international students growing up in rapidly westernizing eastern countries. These students that are in between cultures are more willing to and more easily associate with both domestic and international students. International students from predominantly Caucasian countries such as European countries, associate more with domestic students but interact within their culture as well. Within cultural divides, campus involvement also plays a huge role in social structure. Athletes and greek life members hold high social influence and are most often domestic students. Their company is desired and they can easily control the social success of others. For example, many frat boys who are also often athletes can decide who can attend their parties and who will have to spend their weekend eating ramen in their dorm. Joining a frat, sorority, or athletic team is a sure-shot way for socially disadvantaged students, such as international students, to scale the social ladder. However, it is important to consider that these groups are highly gatekept and difficult to invaginate and enter.

Greek Life organizations at Trinity are known to actively deepen the crack and propagate social division by developing informal but strict criteria for who can party with them. For example, for freshmen in my batch, Kappa Sigma has been a student favorite for letting in all ethnicities and groups. It is the fraternity that I most often visit. However, other fraternities, most glaringly Psi Upsilon, are notorious for asking non-white students to turn around, especially male students and females who don’t live up to their beauty standards.

As an international student growing up in a non-conservative and rapidly westernizing part of India, who is also very well-traveled and visits the United States often, my understanding and familiarity with American culture has allowed me to become friends with a few domestic students while also being witness to the experiences of the other side. My friends from countries where eastern culture is still dominant are often ignored or overlooked by domestic students and reciprocate by showing little to no interest in getting to know them. There is also a small group of social outcasts who regardless of their nationality, are on the margins of society, either by choice or as punishment for anti-social behavior.

The objective of closely studying this social stepladder is to understand the “insiders” and “outsiders” to deduce who holds power in a system of informal social control.

Even though all members at Trinity are a part of a close-knit group because of their frequent and recurrent face-to-face interactions, smaller groups within the student pool have an emotional proximity that forms clusters. Each group has its own set of insiders and outsiders. Individuals are less likely to report their insiders or even subject them to informal social punishment such as ostracization or negative gossip (Muller, 2003). On the other hand, they are more likely to react negatively to the anti-social behavior of outsiders and perhaps even report them to authorities because they can’t lose a social group they never had. However, reporting incidents is not considered ordinary behavior, and most students don’t consider “outsider” incidents important enough to act on. This brings into question if informal control is as detrimental to the social lives of students as we think it is or as Muller (2003) and Giberson (2012) suggested.



**Does informal social control effectively transcend boundaries?**

In most societal structures, the reactions of those with more social power such as the athletes and frat members towards the anti-social behaviors of those from lower ranks, can damage their social lives. At Trinity, I've noticed a slightly different way of functioning. While those at the top are more desired and have larger friend groups and control over social gatherings, highly valued and undervalued groups don't see each other's faults and actions as very important and often can't be bothered with responding to them. For example, if a member of an athletic team cheats with their teammate's boyfriend, members outside of the social group won't be as bothered by the news and may not even seek informal justice. Similarly, if an international minority student was caught spreading false rumors about their friends within the group, members of a Greek Life organization won't pay much attention to the news, that is if it ever reaches them at all. This makes us question, for issues that hold a little more importance than cheating partners and rumor spreading, such as the use of racist or homophobic language, if informal control is the most effective way of preventing similar offenses in the future. This is a different approach to that of Muller's 20 years ago in 2003, who thinks that reactions from those outside your group can affect your social standing. In these cases, a more standardized form of behavior correction, or formal social control by admin, deans, etc, may be more beneficial in protecting students from harm and creating a safe space for them. The reciprocal power, as suggested by Campbell Brown, might have weakened at a time when students have started to realize the fragility of made-up societal structures.

### **Technology shock**

As discussed by Aldeaneuva (2022), the use of technology created waves of systemic shock that changed the way informal social control functions. She mentions that technology "Shifted dynamics in social capital [and], reputation currency" and that "Informal Social Control [was] still possible, information was still reliable; Speed, accuracy [and] reach, raised stakes of reputation building".

The rapid increase in the use of technology has changed our world in every way, and had a large impact on campus life, especially at a place as historical as Trinity College. A few days ago I spoke to a Trinity alumnus with whom I discussed how technology has completely changed the way we are able to access each other. She said that it is surprising to her, that students and professors are still able to get a hold of each other after class and that you don't have to leave your dorm to know what Mather Hall is serving for lunch.

It doesn't come as a surprise that technology would change informal social control as well. Reporting misbehavior or "ratting someone out" is seen as anti-social behavior which is sometimes more punishable than breaking a rule of formal social control. As per societal norms, a student who reports underage drinking might have to face the more severe consequences of informal social justice than the formal consequences that the students caught in the act would have to deal with. With the rise of technology, there is the added benefit of anonymity, which allows students to inform their community of an individual's wrongdoings, whether true or not, without facing the consequences of being a "tattle tale", or as we say in India, a "complaint box".

*“The use of social media allows students to reliably check what they hear... however... this creates technological disequilibrium... the source of information could have misunderstood a picture, tweet or status update and start spreading false information that can severely harm a person’s reputation.” - Giberson (2012)*

As identified by Giberson, the blessing of anonymity also comes with the curse of ambiguity and individuals having to fill the gaps of missing information using assumptions that can quickly get out of hand. Pictures, tweets, and posts with otherwise innocent intentions can be misinterpreted and knock down the first domino that ends in unjustified and unnecessary informal social punishment.

As discussed by Aldeanueva (2022) in her guest lecture, the pandemic brought upon Trinity a new age of confidence to out other students, instilled by social media and fueled by the lockdown. Students were using online platforms to expose incidents that stirred social outrage, landed students in a whirlwind of formal and informal justice, and were many a time inaccurate or false.

However, this isn’t to say that this anonymity and newfound power to report incidents without facing social consequences is all that bad. It allows students to seek formal social justice for severe incidents such as sexual assault, hate crimes, bullying, and more that would otherwise bind themselves to the student's social image and could haunt them for years. For example, a student who is a victim of sexual assault might find it easier to anonymously report their sexual predator rather than have the incident attached to their name and reputation for the rest of their time at college and perhaps after it too. Of course, it is possible to report such incidents without the use of technology and remain unknown to the student body, as seen in the reported incident of two Swastikas being drawn on a Jewish student’s door this semester, whose name we do not know but whose experience inspired social action and change. However, social media may make seeking help a little easier for students who are hesitant to come forward and correct repetitive social misbehavior.

## **Pandemic Shock**

As discussed by Brown and Aldeanueva, there was a resurgence of technology shock that came hand in hand with the pandemic shock.

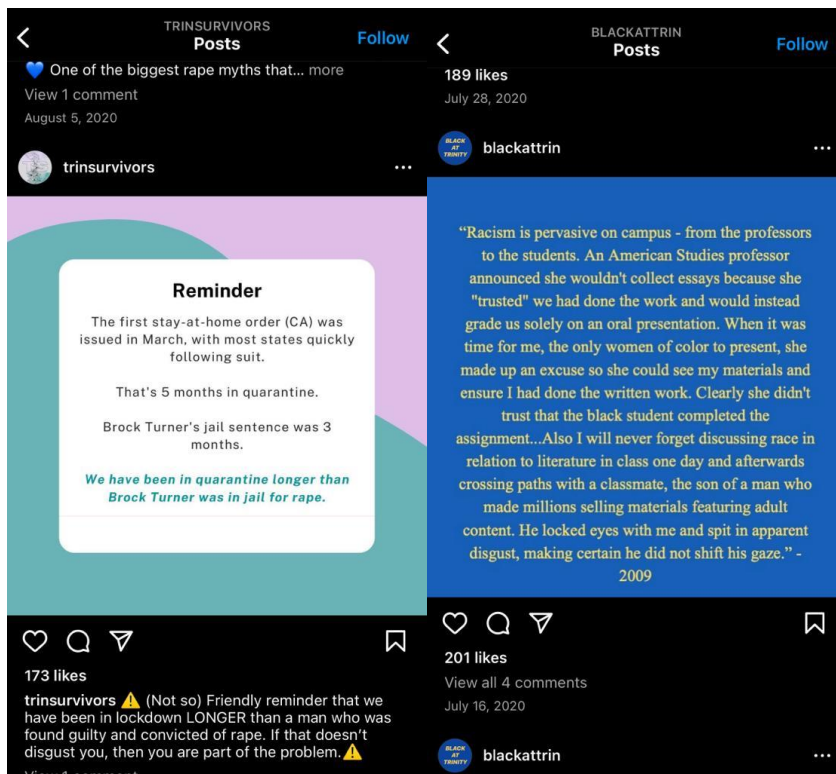
*““F\*\*\* it mindset. nothing mattered for the remainder of that week... rooms hosted end of year parties— no one looked like they had any boundaries... no rules, no restrictions” (Male, Athletics, Class of 2021)” - Adeanueva (2021)*

This “F\*\*\* it mindset” that Aldeanueva mentions in her research was the root cause for large waves of systemic shock to the structure of informal social control and justice at Trinity College. Students treated the time before and during the pandemic as not only the end of their social lives at college, but the end of the world. No one was concerned about being formally or informally punished for breaking social or campus norms, and in some cases, it brought out the worst in people. As discussed by Aldeanueva (2022), students were partying in crowded social gatherings

during the onset of a global pandemic without a care in the world for socially distancing from those who were sick.

Brown and Aldeanueva also cite and discuss social media pages such as @blackattrin and @trinsurvivors, where students were constantly posting stories of incidents that they were otherwise hesitant to publicly share.

*“When students were apart, grievances about hot-button topics were aired over Instagram”*  
- Campbell Brown (Year unknown)



From personal experience, I can confirm that Trinity needs to work a little more on ensuring that its students respect people from all backgrounds, but I also understand how difficult it is to achieve that in a place where students come to explore their own opinions and reserve the right to freedom of speech. Perhaps a part of the ignorance can be attributed to the fact that a large portion of Trinity students are American students who haven't left the country and haven't seen much diversity other than that already present here. Even though the small microaggressions from students and professors still exist today, I have not witnessed the kind of outing that occurred on social media during the pandemic. This goes to show that the pandemic and its partial promise of an apocalyptic end to our social lives, played a huge role in changing the social norms that determine internal, direct, and indirect control. This is supported by Brown and Aldeanueva's recollection of how students would take pictures of those socializing or not wearing masks and send them to admin. This is a huge shift in social culture where instead of disregarding formal justice and turning to informal control that was better suited to students,

students were now willingly participating in anti-social behavior such as reporting other students and actively seeking formal social control and justice from admin.

### **Should students be in charge?**

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the relationship between the members of a community and its caretakers is more complicated in places like colleges, universities, and schools, where there is a generational gap between the two and a lack of emotional importance. When caretakers can't relate to and understand the lives of emerging adults who are exploring independence for the first time, their rules of formal social control always seem to fall short of the students' expectations. To balance this, close-knit groups (Muller, 2003), tend to come up with their own social norms and informal control to administer justice and ensure adherence to the socially desired behavior.

Supporters of formal social control would argue that students, while legally adults, aren't yet capable of making decisions that are in their best interests. They would argue that allowing students to come up with their own rules would create chaos, might land them in legal trouble, and would defeat the purpose of college: academics and education.

Supporters of informal social control would argue that campus rules are often inconvenient and a result of a lack of understanding of the community's social system. Many are outraged that formal social control often punishes groups for the mistake of individuals, unlike informal social control which punishes individuals for their actions. Many here at Trinity also believe that campus rules restrict freedom of speech, as seen in the recent incident where students were asked to take down Gadsden flags, and eventually, everyone was asked to take down all flags. Informal social control is born from a more thorough understanding of Trinity's social system, that one can only achieve from being in the midst of it.

### **Conclusion**

In this debate, I fall smack dab in the middle. I feel that campus regulations can often be unnecessary and tone-deaf towards things that students are currently experiencing. Since, coming to the United States for college, I have visited two universities (New York University and Rutgers University) to see my friends, where I think this absurdity is even more prevalent. At one, students aren't allowed to have overnight guests and at another, students aren't even allowed to have friends come up to their dorm rooms for a minute or two. While out of concern for safety, these rules are blind to the fact that students are becoming independent adults, creating their own social circles, and forming lifelong friendships.

I also believe that to some extent, we need formal social control, to at least stress the importance of following state laws and ensuring that students don't get themselves in legal or medical trouble for drinking, doing drugs, and more. Regardless, students will continue to drink and take drugs before they reach legal age, but having campus rules grants them amnesty and punishes them with disciplinary action instead of a felony charge. As much as I support informal social control, it often crosses my mind how it can become harmful and unjustly punish groups just because of where they come from or what their beliefs are. As we've often seen in the real world,



when members of minorities participate in anti-social behavior, their actions are generalized to groups that give rise to stereotypes. When a member of a community with privilege participates in anti-social behavior, their stories are highly individualized so that we believe that it is a personal fault instead of a cultural one. The same can and often does happen on a smaller scale on campus when we resort to informal social justice. In these cases, it is better to have a fair third party step in and try and reduce the informal social punishment that the individual or group is subjected to.

To conclude, I believe that it would be best if admin openly and completely considers the views of the students, not just the elected student government, but the entire student body, before making rules of formal control. It is impossible to step on the breaks of informal social control. As long as a close-knit group exists, social norms and informal social control will fester, but by taking the time to understand these norms, admin can make well-informed decisions and come up with rules that will stick, protect the community, and support growth.

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