



Rhetorical Criticism

Glossing Over the Bruises: *It Ends With Us*, the Commodification of Trauma and the Sanitization of Survivor Stories for Mass Consumption



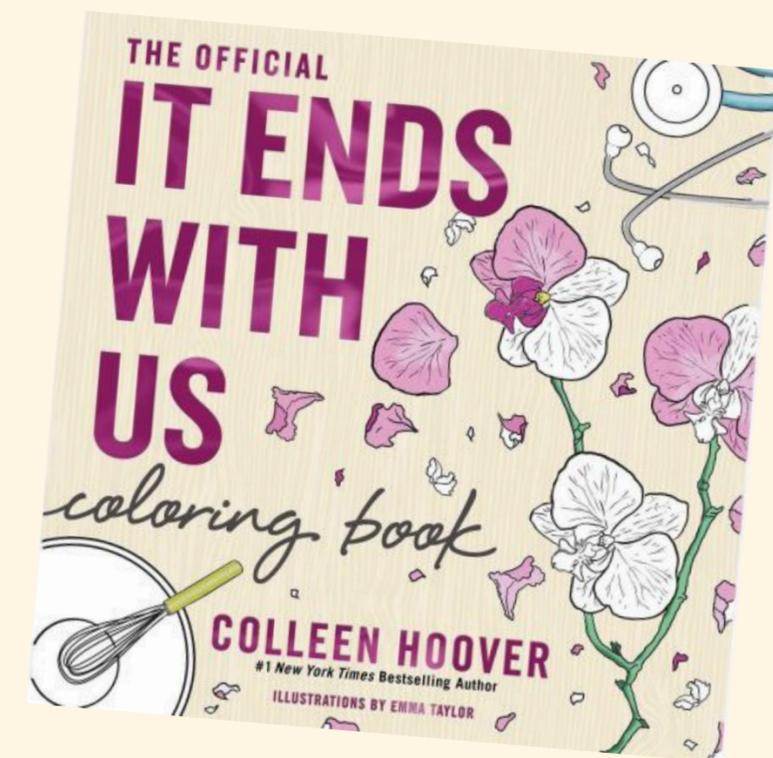
Discussion of Domestic Violence

The Text

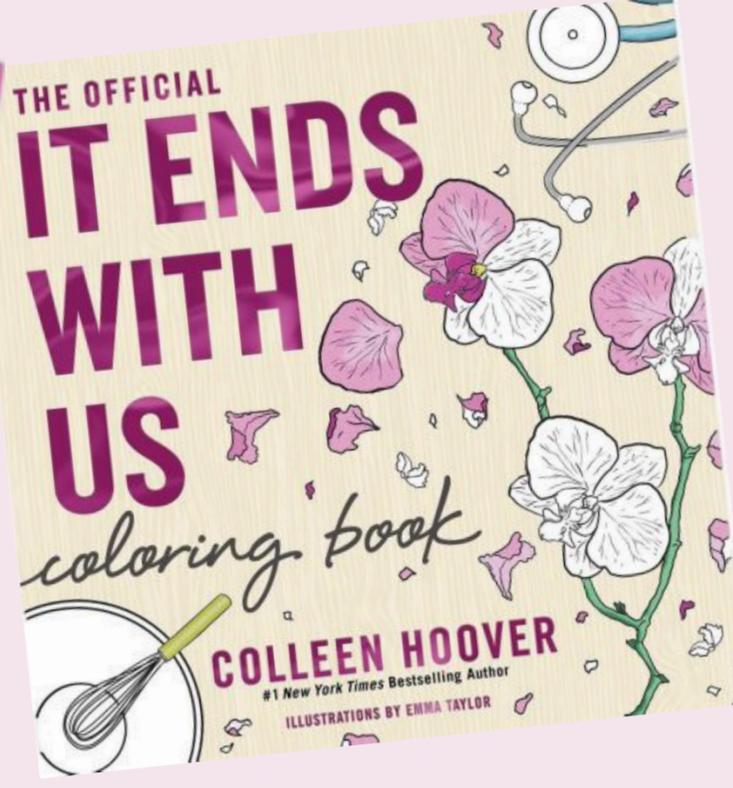
Promotional merchandise created for the film adaptation of Colleen Hoover's novel, *It Ends With Us*, and sold for profit, rather than directing proceeds to charity.



Olive and June
nail polish collection



Coloring book



 victoriianewman why did you make merch for a book about domestic violence?

 ethan @mamiwatta4ever · Follow
 Replying to @mynameismarines
 Oh wow, coloring in a woman's bruises is totally calming /heavy sarcasm.
 6:35 PM · Jan 10, 2023
 55 Reply Copy link
 Read more on X

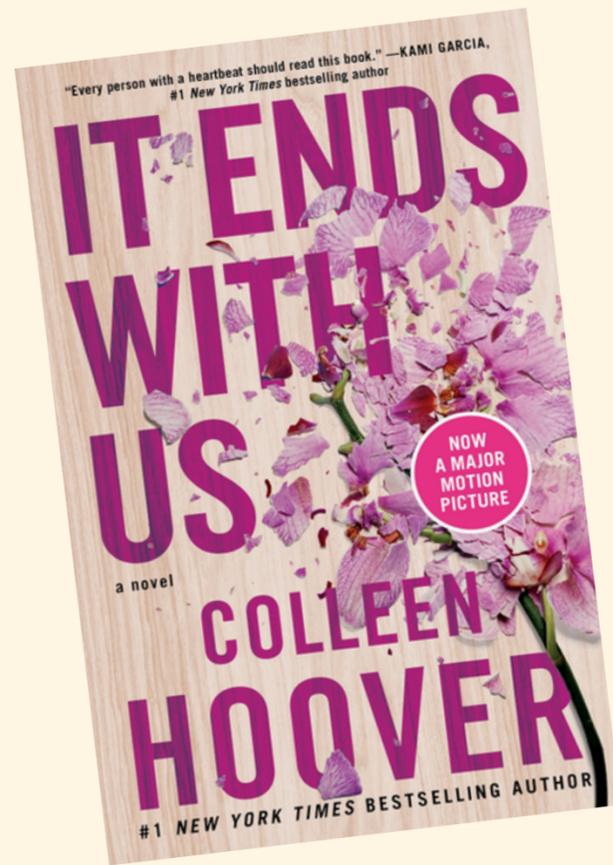
 charlottemclaren__ 2 w
 this is WILDLY inappropriate... i'm always the first defending these books but good god this is just ridiculous. THIS is romanticising abuse.
 84 likes Reply



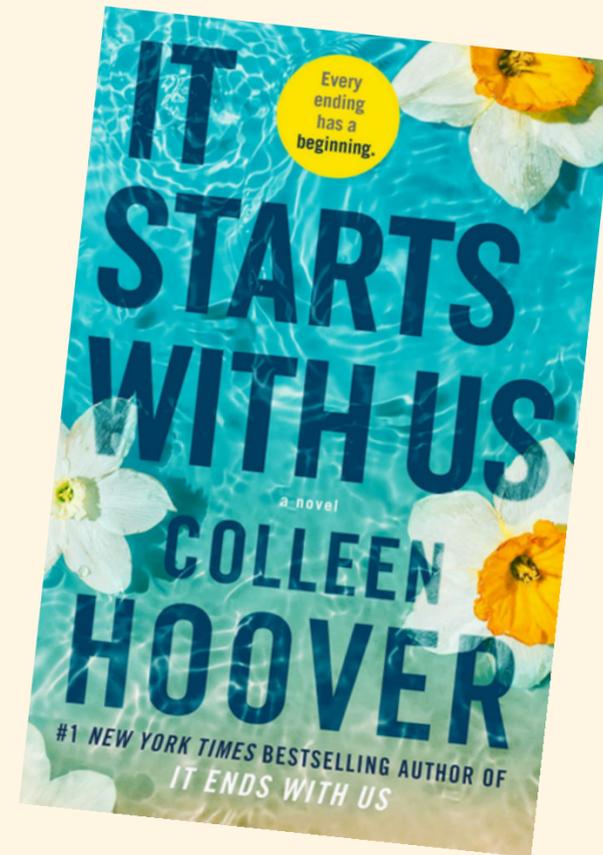
BRAVE BLUSH
 pastel pink lily
 ADD TO BAG - \$9
 See it on our besties



Intertextuality



Explores themes of domestic abuse, self-discovery, and the power of leaving a toxic relationship.



Follows Lily on her new life with her daughter following her decision to break the cycle of abuse.



Main character's name is Lily Blossom Bloom and she owns a flower shop.

Critique Summary

- The campaign & related merchandise reveal the **absence of ethical storytelling and audience sensitivity** via aesthetic-driven branding tactics and **strategic transformation of domestic abuse into digestible, consumable goods**.
- While these campaigns aim to generate excitement and align with the story's surface-level themes of female empowerment, they ultimately **trivialize the story's core issue of domestic abuse** by substituting meaningful engagement with pastel visuals and floral symbolism.
- This rhetorical move reflects a broader cultural tendency to **commodify trauma**, particularly women's trauma, for profit, while public backlash via social media offers a counter-narrative rooted in ethical accountability.

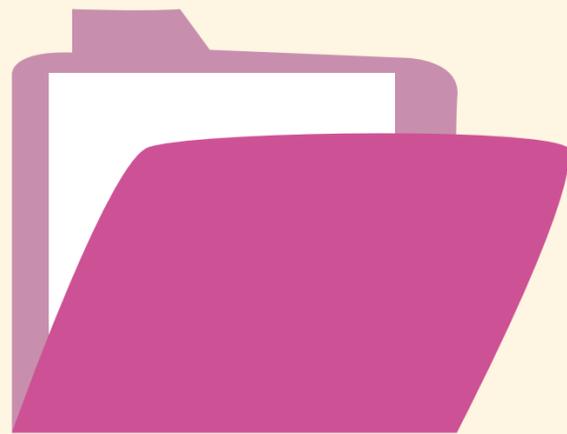
Rationale & Purpose



Connects to broader cultural conversations about how stories of trauma are commodified in popular media.



Highlighting this failure calls for greater accountability and ethical responsibility from creators and marketers.



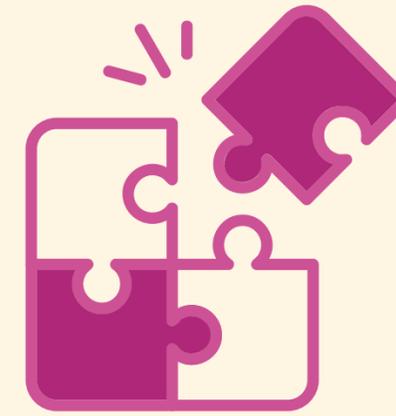
Context



Topic

The commodification of trauma, especially domestic abuse, within media industries and consumer culture.

To create consumable goods from a traumatic narrative is to trivialize it and take advantage of it for economic gain.



Embedded Problem

Dangers of reducing complex trauma narratives to consumable aesthetics.

- Trauma narratives are commodified in mass media, turning suffering into profitable content (Rothe, 2011).
- Media portrayals of domestic abuse shape public perceptions and influence how seriously real-life abuse is taken (Lloyd, 2020).

Subversive Marxist Position

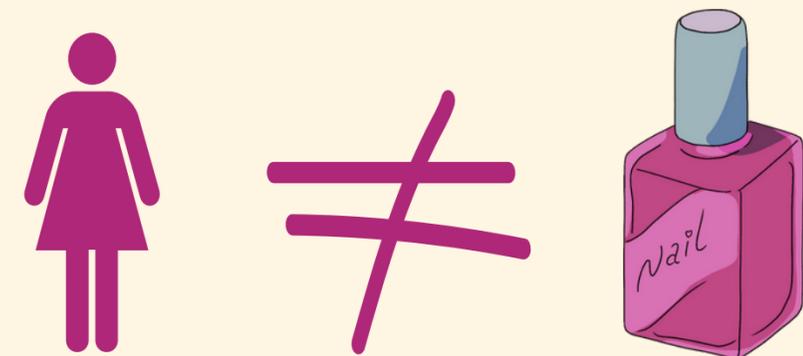
Media and branding reduce lived experiences into products for profit, reinforcing **capitalist ideologies** and separating audiences from authentic emotional engagement.

- Experiences stripped of their emotional/political weight, repackaged into marketable content, & sold back to audiences under the **guise of empowerment**.
- By focusing on shallow symbols of femininity, the merchandise **distracts from the core message** of the original novel (survival, strength, and generational healing).

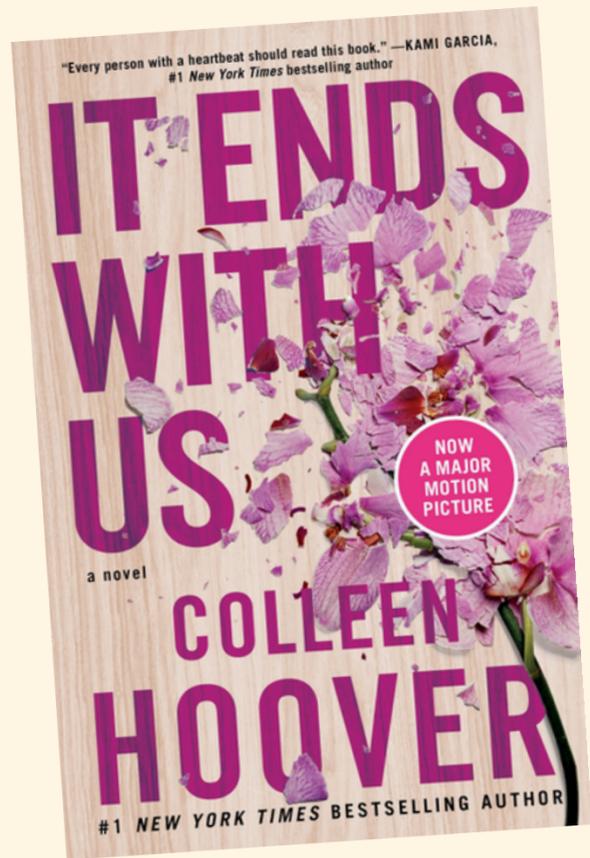
& A Feminist Criticism

Women as objects, rather than subjects/subject-object distinction (Brumett, 1994, 173)

Reducing womanhood to objects used *by* women (i.e., beauty tools) rather than allowing women to stand in as themselves and have their own voices is disempowering.



Text as Reactive to Context



Merchandise was produced in response to the novel's emotional and commercial impact, yet it **fails** to engage meaningfully with the complex issue of domestic abuse, commodifying it for profit rather than proactively supporting awareness, advocacy, or survivor voices.

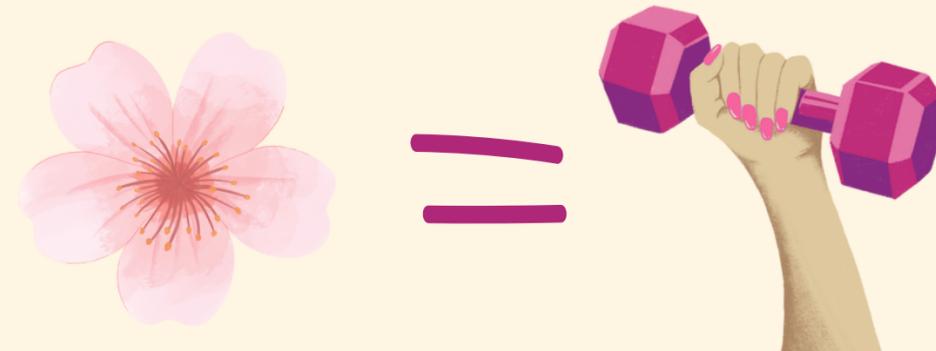


Analysis

Preferred Reading



Engaging with traditionally feminine symbols, like painting nails or wearing floral patterns, is empowering.



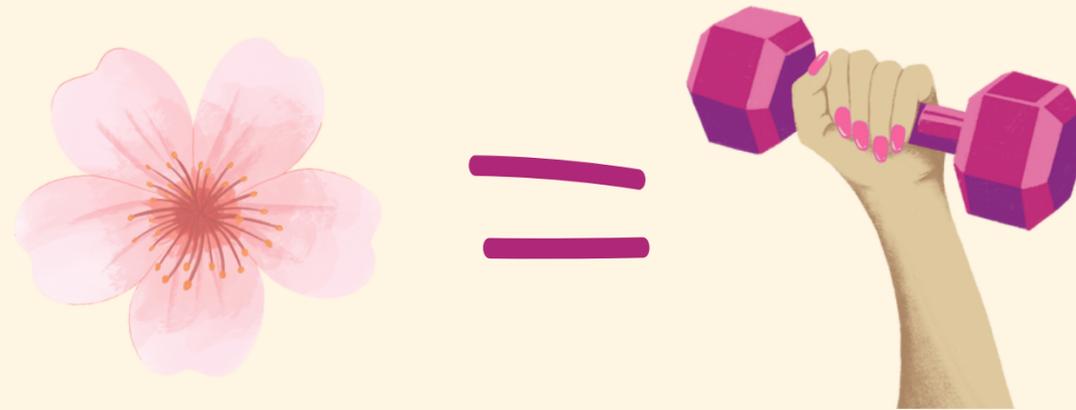
These aesthetic choices are markers of strength and resilience, implying that the main character, Lily, is not defined solely by her experience with domestic abuse but by her ability to maintain femininity and beauty in the face of hardship.

This reading redirects attention away from the trauma at the center of the narrative and toward surface-level symbols of empowerment.

Transformation Strategy

(Brummett, 1994)

Pastel nail polish and floral motifs are transformed into a symbolic stand-in for strength and resilience.

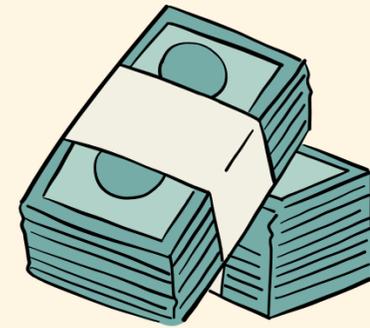


Reworks the story's core theme of surviving domestic abuse into something more pleasant and marketable: empowerment through beauty and consumerism.

By associating these products with Lily's character, the marketing encourages consumers to feel that adopting these aesthetics is a way of channeling her resilience.

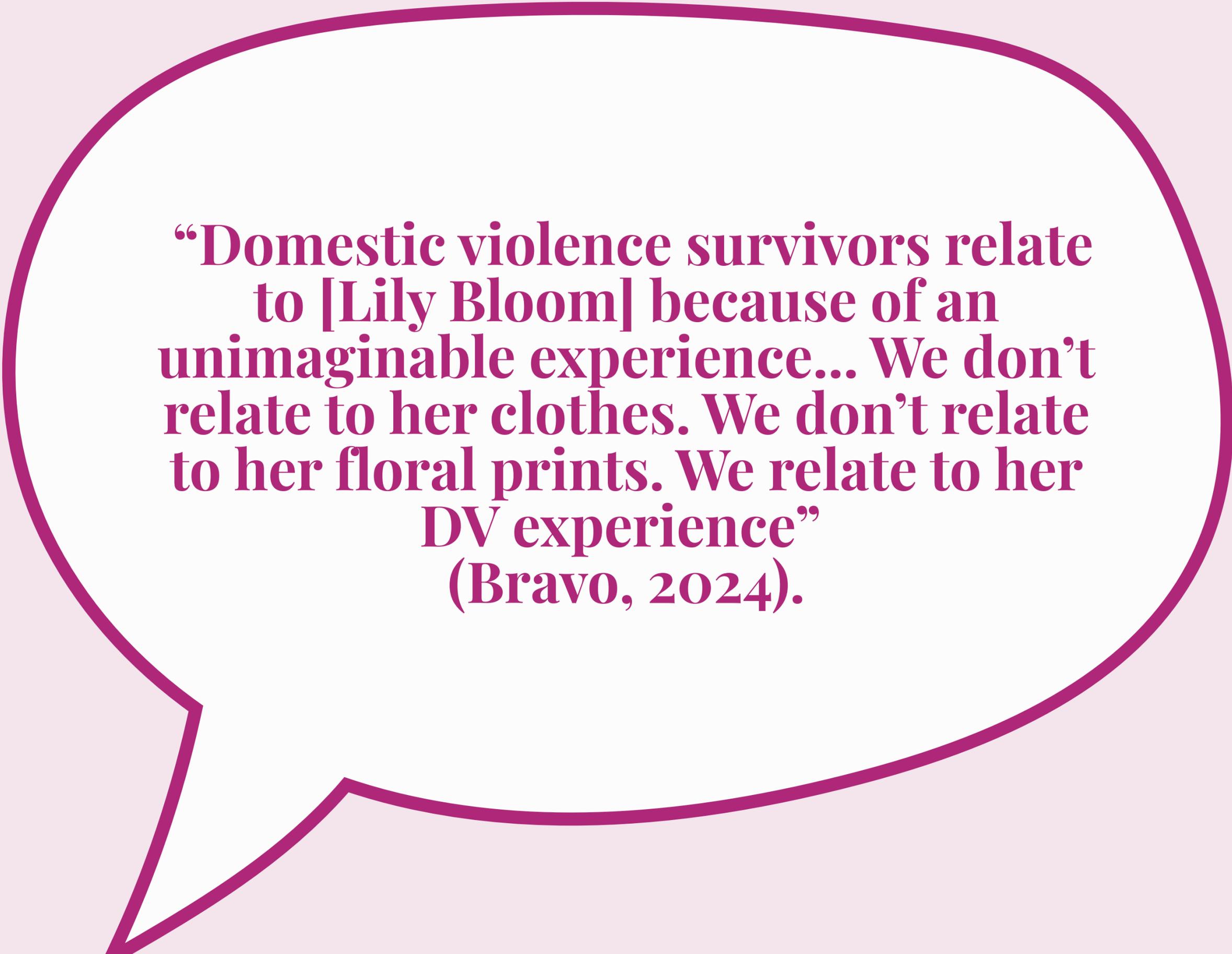
Subversive Reading

This strategy replaces meaningful engagement with surface-level symbolism.



Strips emotional intensity and replaces it with consumable symbols that fail to capture the lived reality of domestic abuse.

Rather than honoring Lily's strength through survivor-centered storytelling, the branding encourages a **superficial engagement** with her experience.



**“Domestic violence survivors relate to [Lily Bloom] because of an unimaginable experience... We don’t relate to her clothes. We don’t relate to her floral prints. We relate to her DV experience”
(Bravo, 2024).**

Absence Strategy

(Brummett, 1994)



Marketing materials strategically exclude references to trauma, violence, or healing to **construct an aesthetically pleasing image of the story.**

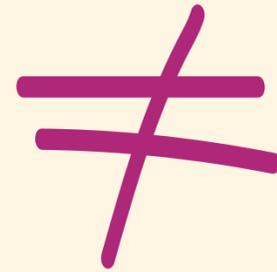
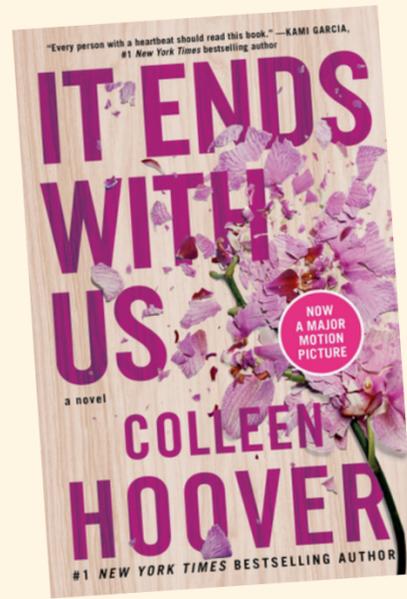


Spotlights more desirable aspects of Lily's identity, such as her career as a florist or her association with beauty. Framed as a strong, fashionable, and relatable female figure without the discomfort of confronting her abuse.



Has a **capitalist function**; by avoiding the difficult subject matter, the brand can market the film as light and commercially viable.

Subversive Reading



Avoidance of uncomfortable truths and replacing them with symbolic gestures that lack depth or actionable impact.

Profit over campaigns that would have aligned more meaningfully with the book's themes, such as promoting healing journals or donating proceeds to domestic violence organizations.

Promotion unfaithfully represented the novel's themes and overall lasting impression for readers.

Subversive Reading: Examples



Sequel, *It Starts With Us*, symbolizes a new beginning where Lily breaks the generational cycle of abuse.

Promotional message “It Starts With Beautiful Nails,” trivializes the narrative’s emotional weight.

Rather than emphasizing the courage, resilience, or support systems required to leave an abusive relationship, the slogan suggests that breaking the cycle begins with a manicure.



Naming a pink-toned nail polish “Brave Blush” in a film where the protagonist is physically abused and bruised by her husband is **ironic and uncomfortable**.

Key findings

1.



2.



3.

The campaign **repackages a narrative about domestic abuse** into aesthetically pleasing merchandise that centers on ‘femininity’, beauty, and surface-level empowerment.

Using Brummett’s strategies of **transformation and absence**, it becomes clear that the campaign trades emotional depth and survivor-centered storytelling for profit-driven branding that **simplifies and distorts the narrative’s original meaning**.

While the novel engages ethically with themes of abuse and healing, the marketing campaign **sanitizes those themes to create a commercially viable product**.

Implications



Underscores the value of rhetorical criticism in revealing how meaning is shaped and **distorted by capitalist logic** within popular culture.



Public backlash on social media reflects **growing cultural literacy and resistance**, pointing to a demand for more respectful storytelling.



Calls attention to the **ethical responsibilities** of media producers and marketers.

Why It Matters

Stories about trauma carry real emotional and political weight.

Diluted stories...



- **reinforce** harmful cultural narratives that beauty, consumption, or aesthetic alignment equate to empowerment
- **limit** the kinds of conversations society is willing to have about serious issues

Future Directions



Further examination of the **commodification of trauma**, particularly within the romance genre and "BookTok"-driven publishing phenomena



More work could be done to investigate **alternative marketing practices** that center survivor voices or use proceeds to support advocacy and education.

References

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Lloyd, M. (2020). *Examining domestic violence and abuse in mainstream and social media: Representations and responses*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Rothe, A. (2011). *Popular trauma culture: Selling the pain of others in the mass media*. Rutgers University Press.

Stumpf, B. (2024). *It Ends With Us is a hit. But does it trivialize domestic violence?* The Washington Post.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/2024/08/20/it-ends-with-us-is-hit-does-it-trivialize-domestic-violence/>.