

January 31, 2019

Dear AIMM Members and Potential Employers:

Valerie Toledo has a history of accelerated achievement in the face of barriers. She has the intellectual gifts and personal attributes to succeed in marketing and communications, and to achieve the ambitious goals she has in mind. She will be a credit to AIMM and to the company that decides to add her to its team. I will try to do her justice here.

Over the past three years, I have come to know Valerie well. In my internship seminar in Fall 2017, she tested her research abilities while also working side-by-side as an intern with the founders of Image Revolver, an innovative Philadelphia video marketing firm. When evaluating her performance, the firm's principals described her as "driven", "full of ideas", and a great "fit" with their team.

This year, Valerie is one of 14 Communication majors at the University of Pennsylvania to take on the challenge of proposing a year-long research project ending in a senior honors thesis. I have the pleasure of serving as Ms. Toledo's advisor as she investigates the cultural practices of young women music fans who queue for concerts in Philadelphia.

The feeling I have when Valerie turns in a draft or revision of a thesis assignment is the same feeling I had when I saw her sing her solo with the campus group *Disney a Capella* – the outwardly modest student belts out something unexpected and fabulous. During meetings, she is focused on communicating her discoveries, understanding guidance and expectations, and then getting back down to work. After exploring existing literature at the intersections of ritual, queuing and fan culture, which describes groups of young women as participating in ritualized behavior, she saw gaps.

She recognized young women's goals and practices beyond ritual: Scamming was organized, coded, passed down community practice. Digital ticket-altering scams. Access to stage "pit" scams. Hierarchical power rewards for achievements over time. Valerie went in search of alternative lenses and returned with conceptual models of organized crime (it fit). She also noticed that scholars hadn't captured developments outside the fan queues themselves: spin-off communities of women from across the globe who create digital spaces where conversations and relationships are no longer about music and fandom. In addition to spot interviews, observations and photography in concert queues, she included interviews with spin-off community members in her research.

Early in her thinking about her research, Valerie attacked her topic like a photographer, from every angle, seeing methodological possibilities in analyzing fan-constructed images, social networks, the role of social media, conversations and practices online and offline, group identity and body adornment, coded language (including silent, full-body gestures in queues, reproduced via selfies or in tweets via emoji, and understood only by insiders), and the interplay of evolving tactics of control by authorities and counter-practices by fans. Valerie also responds to coaching and constructive criticism like a pro, with care and creativity. Her songwriting and novella-writing talents are evident in her academic and professional writing as well: it's direct and concise, and a pleasure to read. She genuinely enjoys reshaping text, with impressive honing of both insights and clarity in revisions.

Valerie said of her quantitative methods course with a renowned scholar: "I love it." This is a student who can juggle all the tools and methods. She has worked with analytics, designed a platform-based beta site,

and taught herself to code. She will be voracious investigating and adopting the array of methods she can bring to a career in marketing.

There is a phrase used in fan queueing, “getting barricade”, that describes Valerie. It refers to crossing barriers constructed to make it as hard as possible for fans to get as close as possible to their heart’s desire. As a Cuban-American growing up in a traditional environment, Valerie has challenged many barriers constructed inside and outside her Miami community. As the daughter of immigrants, she grew up watching her parents work together to start and build a business; Valerie has learned to be self-reliant and inventive when resources are scarce. She started college while in high school, and when she wanted to attend Penn, her parents were leery of the financial burden, so Valerie struck a compromise: she would finish in three years, no matter how many credits Penn did or did not accept in transfer. She has lived up to that commitment.

Her goal now is to investigate and challenge the ways that marketers use routinized methods to define, create and characterize groups, especially regarding identity, ethnicity and race, and gender. She is determined to “get barricade”, and the company that tests Ms. Toledo’s talents as a professional contributing to its team is going to be very happy, and eventually, extremely proud.

Sincerely,

Susan Haas

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