

Digital Commensality: Mediating Human Interaction during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Due to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic that largely started impacting people in 2020, our lifestyles have been dramatically changed. People need to social distance to prevent the spread of the virus, and it is hard to interact with others in person. Those situations give people high stress, and still, as of spring 2022, people barely do the things that were previously taken for granted before the COVID-19 pandemic, such as eating together with loved ones or talking with friends face-to-face without wearing masks. In Japan, a social phenomenon called “online nomikai” became dramatically popular in the spring of 2020 to overcome these situations. People have done online nomikai by using their smartphones, making it easy to participate and screenshot and share via social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook with a hashtag. Those constant acts boost the recognition of online nomikai as popular culture in such a short period.

Online nomikai is considered part of “digital commensality,” and the term is defined as various scenarios in which people use digital technology to have a food-related experience such as eating (Spence et al. 2). Spence and colleagues argue that digital technology increasingly provides more advanced multi-sensory experiential dining opportunities and helps people engage in commensality with remote and virtual dining partners (2). Looking at people's “digitally/mediated food-centered activities” (Cenni and Vásquez 99) before the COVID-19 pandemic at the global level, “Mukbang” and “Skeating” were well-researched examples. Mukbang is a Korean term for describing eating by oneself while watching someone else eating over live Internet streaming. Skeating also refers to digital commensality in which people eat food together with a remotely-located loved one or friend (Spence 41). Furthermore, on an experiment level, a time-shifted tele-dining system (KIZUNA) was also developed in Japan, allowing friends and

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relatives who cannot eat simultaneously due to geographic and other factors to simulate co-dining (Nawahdah and Inoue 779). According to Nawahdah and Inoue, KIZUNA was designed to allow diners to enjoy meals in the same virtual environment. Furthermore, KIZUNA has improved the communication of diners and significantly increased the sense of realism at a distance (780).

Thus, at an experimental level, co-dining online or digital commensality has shown promising results in improving communication and people's subjective wellbeing via food consumption. However, based on some reflections on daily life before COVID-19, digitally mediated food-centered activities, including digital commensality, have not yet been researched as much as expected, at least in Japan. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic has made an actual change in the relationship between digital technology and food-related activities in Japan as manifested in the social phenomenon online nomikai. This research provides a better understanding of how online nomikai changes our lifestyle, what types of digitally mediated food-centered activities are widely accepted and not, and changes in Japanese food culture and related human subjective wellbeing.

Methodology

This ethnographic research was mainly conducted between March and September 2020 among Japanese nationals living in London and Japan, using interviews, participant observation, and SNS observation related to online nomikai and cooking lessons via the Internet. Follow-up research was conducted until the summer of 2021. The total number of interviewees was forty, and each interview lasted about thirty minutes to one hour, largely conducted using Zoom. All data were recorded on a fieldnote, using mostly direct quotations translated from Japanese into English. Interviewees remained confidential to avoid identifying individuals, as the research community was small. Initials are used in place of names to protect identity.

“Digital anthropology” or “digital ethnography” targets people's behavior and interaction with digital technology in this global era, and that realm is gradually expanding. According to Miller, “digital anthropology is an arena within which developments are constantly used to make larger normative and ethical arguments rather than merely observe and account for the consequences of technological change” (1). To narrow the scope, this essay mainly focuses on the people who are temporarily living away from their hometown and maintaining their

relationship with their relatives and friends back home through digital technology during the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, those people tend to feel loneliness and isolation because of little interaction opportunities with the local community and unfamiliar places, even at ordinary times. They tend to connect within a small minority community and frequently interact with the people from their original homes. For instance, many Japanese residents living in London have social gatherings such as eating food together. Through these interactions in their native language, they share the loneliness and survival skills living away from home. However, the complexity of face-to-face communication has been exacerbated by COVID-19, causing people only to interact virtually, creating a reliance on an increasing necessity of digital communication during the pandemic. The scholarship of digital commensality and online activities are relatively new, and the number of secondary sources is limited, especially ethnographic research. This research contributes to that scholarship, particularly in the field of digitally mediated food-centered activities as practices of digital commensality by focusing on the Japanese people's real voices during the pandemic and what it looks like to use digital devices for the act of eating together and communicating with others.

Historical Background of Commensality in Japan

“Commensality” is the act of sharing food and eating together in a social group, such as family and friends. Fischler argues that commensality has promoted and strengthened social cohesion within the group, which has played an essential role in its continued development (528). The act of eating together in small groups is a universal phenomenon as humans, and therefore explanations for describing the concept of commensality are diverse across the world. In Japan, for example, the closest way to describe the act of eating together with someone else, particularly with family, is called “Kyoshoku [eating together].” Adachi published a book *Naze Hitoride Taberuno? [Why do you eat Alone?] (1983)*, in which Adachi argues for the importance of Kyoshoku [eating together], seeing Koshoku [eating alone] as a social problem, and argues for Kyoshoku [eating together] more often. In particular, Adachi is cautious about the situation where children rarely eat together with their family and discusses the importance of eating together from the perspective of psychology and nutrition for children's development. Ezaki also reveals that eating together with family members can stimulate conversation during meals, increase life satisfaction, and decrease depression (485).

Kyoshoku [eating together] became widely recognized around the 1980s, after the collapse of high economic growth, when the family ate together less often, and more people ate alone. Therefore, Ezaki recommends that people dine with family as much as possible, even if the family can eat together only a few times per week (2). However, as Koshoku [eating alone] is considered a social problem in Japan, different perspectives of eating together with family are raised, and Fujiwara argues that it is not always possible to have a meal together as a family. He creates a new Japanese term of commensality which is called “Enshoku” in his book *Enshokuron – Koshoku to Enshoku no aida – [Theory of Enshoku- Between Koshoku and Kyoshoku-]*. Enshoku is a more casual type of Kyoshoku [eating together] with less pressure to eat a meal with family. Fujiwara points out that the Japanese government and education too much emphasize eating food with family even though the formation of the family is becoming diverse nowadays. He argues that loose connection within a community is critical to tackling Koshoku [eating alone]. One of the crucial places where commensality occurs is a school lunch called Kyushoku [school lunch]. Originally, school lunch is a way to take in nutritious food and a place where children can learn about food social capital, socialization, food literacy such as table manners, and volunteering to help clean plates by interacting with others. However, it is also affected by COVID-19, and children nowadays have to eat lunch meals at individual seats in a classroom facing the same direction, and basically, no private conversation has been allowed during lunchtime at schools since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. Classrooms are silent during Kyushoku [school lunch], and only the sound of chewing can be heard, which is strange and different from the pleasant commensality of ordinary times. Silent eating is not normal in commensality that people imagined before the pandemic.

Moreover, school lunch provides diverse meals in general, and children can learn to eat disliked foods while eating with others. However, that opportunity dramatically decreases because there are no interactions among students during Kyushoku [school lunch]. Long-term analysis is necessary about how Mokushoku [silent eating], which has also been created due to COVID-19, affects children's eating practice and subjective wellbeing. At least, based on an interview with an elementary school teacher, KH, children seem sad as they have to eat quietly and seem tired of the situation.

As for adults' institutional mealtime practice with the advancement of work from home, there are fewer opportunities to casually go out to eat with people

during lunch hours (typically 12:00-13:00) or after work once COVID-19's outbreak occurred. Some company cafeterias have introduced reducing the number of seats for social distancing, and *Mokushoku* [silent eating] is also encouraged according to MK. Additionally, it has become difficult to invite people to have meals in person unconditionally because of individual people's different morals and acceptable values about COVID-19.

Thinking about these mealtime practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional norm of commensality has changed: eating at the same table and sharing the same food (Fischler 529). Those practices are intrinsically appreciated in Japan and other parts of the world (Cenni and Vásquez 99), and it has been practiced for at least 12,000 years in human history. Ishige mentions that through sharing a meal, people confirm our sense of belonging to the group and seek our identity in the group, and eating together in the same place is considered part of the differentiation from many other species (Ishige 52). Hence, following previous research about commensality, it is likely that sitting around the table in the same place and eating the same meals is an essential component of the establishment of commensality. However, COVID-19 has changed the way people eat food and takes away from the opportunity to do commensality more than ever, particularly with different households or people who do not live in the same place, as seen in some case studies above.

New Phenomenon: Online *Nomikai*

Some people may have seen or heard about “virtual dinner party” (The family dinner project) or “virtual coffee” (Landa 1) in newspapers or Internet sources in English after the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak happened. A similar Japanese concept, “online *nomikai*” (sometimes “remote” is used instead of “online”), was created in 2020 and gained much attention. Online *nomikai* was promptly updated on 16 Apr 2020 in an online dictionary called Kotobank, reflecting people's interests and general perception of what it stands for in Japanese society.

There are various ways to name digitally mediated mealtime practice, meaning people's activities related to food making and consumption by connecting via the Internet. The data indicate that online *nomikai* became a hot topic in Japan during the first outbreak of COVID-19. According to an online questionnaire (N=846 in total) conducted by Ai-land Inc., 40% of the respondents had participated in online *nomikai* during the first waves of the COVID-19

pandemic (survey duration is between 03 Jun 2020 and 09 Jun 2020). Moreover, about 20% of the respondents had not participated in online nomikai but were willing to do it. Regarding the number of times for 335 respondents who had participated in online nomikai, the most common response was two to three times (41%), followed by four to five times (22%), six or more times (7%), and ten or more times (3%).

Many companies have advertised their products by collaborating with new lifestyle online nomikai through Youtube, commercial TV, and magazines. Nowadays, Japanese people easily imagine what online nomikai is, and hereafter, this essay mainly uses online nomikai to describe digitally mediated mealtime practice, including the academic term of digital commensality. At the individual level, people share screenshots of online nomikai on Instagram, and other SNS, which also boosts the popularity of online nomikai. The hashtag #Onlinenomikai is posted by Instagram users more than 96.4K times. Multiple tags such as #WanttodoOnlinenomikai and #EnjoyedOnlinenomikai exist on Instagram (All #hashtags were translated from Japanese). Based on the interviews conducted for this study, online nomikai divides into two ways; one is for ordinary time and the other is for a special time. The next section will give a detailed explanation of changing online nomikai.

Online Nomikai Integrated into Daily Life During The Pandemic

Traditionally, Japanese daily life is considered broadly divided into special days and normal days (Yarimizu 60). The former is called “Hare,” whereas the latter is called “Ke” in Japanese (Yarimizu 60). People take time off from their daily work to celebrate the “Hare” days with their family and community (Yarimizu 60), while people do the daily routine on “Ke” days. Younger people initially accepted online nomikai for normal daily usage as an alternative commensality and for “creating a sense of escape from daily life under COVID-19 restrictions as well as feelings of sociality and bonding with others” (Cenni and Vásquez 100). Several interviewees mentioned that they had done online nomikai for long hours, between 6 and 12 hours, just connecting via Zoom, and everyone did whatever they wanted, such as eating, sleeping, or showering. It indicates that people wanted to share their frustration and escape mobility restrictions due to the state of emergency of COVID-19. People could freely participate in and out of online nomikai, allowing people to feel safe and connected. Therefore, when the state of

emergency was released and people could meet others smoothly again face to face, the popularity of online nomikai, particularly for those who move around easily, gradually decreased. However, interview results show that certain types of people still felt the advantage of online nomikai for daily use after the popularity settled down. Online nomikai functions as a helpful communication tool for those who cannot participate in regular nomikai due to several reasons such as geographical isolation or household situations. For example, MK2, an interviewee who has a full-time job and is a mother of a one-year-old child living in the UK, was on temporary maternity leave from a Japanese-based company. She mentioned that many working mothers cannot attend the nomikai due to time and geographical constraints, so she had a positive perception of the online nomikai. Online nomikai alleviates these difficulties as people can freely join from home. MK2 held several online nomikai with friends and colleagues and said it was easier to participate quickly and constantly communicate with her colleagues and friends while taking maternity leave. In this situation, online nomikai functioned as a replacement for a small chatting place when society changed from working at a company location to working from home as a result of COVID-19. As more and more women continuously want to work after giving birth, the need for accessible communication with colleagues and supervisors in a virtual space is expected to increase.

In this case, online nomikai functions as an information exchange point that allows them to participate from home. A different interviewee, NI, who also has a child, mentioned she has often done online nomikai with other mothers with children of the same age. This comment indicates that online nomikai is playing a new role in the lack of communication among parents and children due to the temporary closure of nursery schools and kindergartens. The concept of online nomikai did not exist in Japanese companies and society before COVID-19. However, shortly, the role of online nomikai will become a necessity, as seen in the above example. Once people have the common recognition of online nomikai, though the interactions are only feasible virtually, they realize that online nomikai creates a sense of community and strength among participants. Some companies have already realized the importance of online nomikai as a communication tool. HI, a Japanese CEO of a start-up company currently working in London, where his wife is studying, has launched a new grant scheme for workers.

We used to do the nomikai in person once a month to socialize with colleagues, but we have moved it online due to COVID-19. We organize

online nomikai once a month and provide a 1,000-yen (about 10 USD) meal supplement for each participant for online nomikai. The average participation rate is about 10 out of 40 people, not much different from a face-to-face nomikai.

At the beginning of the pandemic, online nomikai helped mitigate stress or frustration on “Ke” days. However, long-term observation reveals that the purpose of doing online nomikai has been gradually changing to share enjoyment and unique moments.

In addition to the above case studies of online nomikai observed in 2020, second phase interviews conducted in 2021 also reveal that people have incorporated online nomikai into their daily lives. According to MO, born in Tokyo and living in Hokkaido, 685 miles away from Tokyo, she frequently has commensality with her parents in Tokyo using LINE, a similar tool to WhatsApp. As she has two children, it is difficult to return to her hometown during the pandemic. She said it is beneficial for both her family and her parents to interact via the internet. They have developed new food consumption habits for her parents and her family after they initially started digital commensality, being influenced by the popularity of online nomikai.

Experience Special Time through Online Nomikai

There are several important milestones in the life of a human being, and the rituals performed at these milestones are called rites of passage or initiation (Yarimizu 60). In modern Japan, life milestones include birth, praying for children's growth, entrance to school, graduation, adulthood, marriage, longevity, death, and people gathering and having commensality at these milestones in life (Yarimizu 60). However, several interviews revealed that COVID-19 also affects these rites of passage, especially those involving eating and drinking, which require the removal of masks. Online nomikai has shifted the role from daily use to a particular use for “Hare” days and has gradually come into the spotlight. Some traditional initiations, particularly family events, including food consumption, are shifted online. For instance, there is a traditional custom called “Okuizome” in Japan, a ritual celebration for newborn babies after 100 days of age and involves the infant being (imitatively) fed for the first time to never go without food during their life (Goin *Japanesque* 1). One interviewee, MN, stated how her brother, who lives in Tokyo, organized an “online okuizome” for his

baby in May 2020 by connecting four locations in Japan and the UK. The online okuizome lasted about 30 minutes, and her brother used three cameras to capture special moments of the event and the child's growth with relatives. MN mentioned, "if I had not known the concept of online nomikai or experienced it during the state of emergency, I never would have done it." MT who also had done online okuizome stated, "my mother said that when I was born, she had done Okuizome only with the baby's parents (not with grandparents) because both grandparents lived far away. However, thanks to online okuizome, we could manage to do it with a bigger group including our grandparents this time and glad to do that." COVID-19 has changed Japanese people's lifestyle and perceptions toward online things such as food-centered activities. Notably, it is a good way for people living abroad or in the countryside to experience pre-pandemic customs that were expected to be done face-to-face.

Generally speaking, feeling a reality or a concept such as "Aura," which Benjamin advocated in his book *The Age Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, is challenging when doing online nomikai compared with in-person nomikai. Nevertheless, the online version of okuizome can be an excellent opportunity for individuals to feel the event's authentic atmosphere and wish the baby's growth virtually. In such a traditional event where the person (infant) is unaware of the initiation, it is crucial for those around to understand that the celebration took place. Conducting the online okuizome allows more people to participate, which adds a different level of solemnity than doing it in person. In addition to the interviews for this study, more than 100 public posts with the hashtag #Onlineokuizome on Instagram were confirmed after the first post on 18 Apr 2020. Moving around with a young child can be challenging for parents, particularly during the pandemic, so digitalization of these traditional ritual ceremonies is a byproduct of tradition and new digital technology. COVID-19 has made it possible to connect distant families in a good way.

Similarly, an online birthday party that developed the concept of online nomikai has also been observed among interviewees. This type of well-prepared digital commensality has potentially enhanced people's subjective wellbeing and nutrient intakes. A 61-year-old widowed woman, HK, who conducted an online nomikai using Zoom to celebrate a participant's birthday said, "the online nomikai was a special event for me, and I was able to prepare the meal with more enthusiasm than usual. It was fun to think about what to cook from the time of preparation, and I would like to do it again because it added color to my life." She

also said she prepared nine dishes for this online nomikai and the meal times also took longer. According to De Castro, eating with others would increase the number of chews, the variety of meals prepared, and the quality of life of older people, which is closely related to the enjoyment of meals (1129). There is a high frequency of solitary eating among the elderly that is associated with depression (De Castro 1129). Celebrating special moments through online nomikai has potentially contributed to reducing depression and improving subjective wellbeing, as seen in HK's case.

Moreover, TF, a man who participated in this online birthday party commented:

I went to a supermarket to buy a whole fish (bream) because this (online nomikai) is part of my brother's birthday celebration. Bream is a fish for a celebration fish (in Japan), and I cleaned it by myself to make Sashimi. It took a little bit of time and was expensive, like 1,500 yen (about 15 USD), but I was excited to celebrate my brother's birthday even though we live very far away.

Additionally, another man, HF, also stated, "my wife cooked a gorgeous meal. She wanted to show a gorgeous dish since the meal might be on the screen. Today there were more dishes than usual, so it was a good dinner." Japanese society has seen a shift towards more diverse family styles and increased the number of people living alone. Fischler states that the time spent eating has become shorter, the composition of meals has become simpler, and there has been a considerable increase in both eating out and taking away (528). Generally speaking, cooking and eating can sometimes be a hassle, and especially for those who eat alone, the focus tends to be on less preparation time and food. Previous studies have also shown that solitary eating among the elderly leads to decreased appetite (Kimura et al. 99). Considering these issues, as interviewees commented, the online nomikai became a special occasion particularly for those who are minorities and made "Ke" days into "Hare" days. Online nomikai also have a chance to contribute to being a place to relieve anorexia, prepare a balanced meal, and socialize both during the pandemic and after.

Food Sharing to Experience Sharing

The transformation of Japanese consumer behavior and core values hints at understanding what people are looking for in the act of commensality. Sharing a

table and a meal is a necessary factor for normal commensality, but as mentioned earlier, this is difficult to do during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking back at the history of Japanese consumption behavior, people valued tangible goods and escalated mass-production and mass consumption, particularly after World War II until around the 1980s. According to Takeshige, that is called “Mono Shohi [consumption of goods]” (130). Then from the 2000s, the pattern of people's value for consumption shifted to “Koto Shohi [consumption of intangible things],” which refers to people feeling the value of services or unseen things (intangible goods) and focuses on the experience of using the purchased goods and services (Takeshige 130). People often start sharing their experiences on social networking services (SNS) thanks to the advancement of technology, and people start seeking mental satisfaction rather than material wealth. They can feel satisfaction by posting their experiences on SNS and receiving likes and comments from friends and strangers (Takeshige 130). However, with the advent of these tools for sharing experiences, it has also become possible to satisfy one's desire by simulating the experiences of others (Takeshige 130). As a result, some people became tired of being trapped in the superficial daily experiences of SNS and feared the criticism by others made people less interested in “Koto Shohi [consumption of intangible things]” (Takeshige 130). Then more recently, some people began to feel the value of time and non-repeatable experiences which can only be experienced at one time and place called “Toki Shohi [Time consumption]” (Takeshige 130). The flood of personal experiences on social networking sites has created a sense of *déjà vu* (Takeshige 130). As a result of this sense of *déjà vu*, the desire for highly repeatable experiences has diminished. Some people have come to see the value of enjoying a less repeatable way of spending their time and money for meaningful ways (Takeshige 130). In other words, Japanese people nowadays seek “non-repeatability, participatory and contributive (Sakai 1)” experiences for daily consumption, and that is also applicable to “food” consumption and behavior.

Applying this concept of Japanese people's value for consumption to the context of commensality, people tend to value and share unseen things such as time, experiences, and once-in-a-lifetime events rather than possessing food and sharing it. In the age of plenty of food, sharing food with friends is not necessarily a factor that strengthens community bonds anymore; instead, digital technology can be used to satisfy the desire for experiencing and sharing the unique event in an engaged and meaningful way. The opportunity for commensality in person

with someone else, particularly outside of family members, significantly decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan and exposed the existing social problem *Koshoku* [solo eating]. This essay suggests that “sharing the same place” for commensality is not necessary to compose a traditional way of commensality. Society is now ready to use digital technology for mealtime and food-centered activities.

Development of Diverse Digitally Food-Centered Activities During the Pandemic

The realm of online *nomikai* has been expanding particularly for celebrating special moments as mentioned above, and the related online food-centered business has also emerged. For example, online cooking classes have become popular during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many people spent more time cooking during the lockdown than before (Taparia). Cooking and baking emerged as popular pastimes during the pandemic (Easterbrook-Smith 37), making the “*Ke*” days into the “*Hare*” days. Yuki from Yuki’s Kitchen, a Japanese cooking teacher based in London, started offering online cooking classes using Instagram Live and Zoom as soon as the lockdown began. She conducted several online cooking lessons free to get used to that and accumulate knowledge; then, she started exclusive online cooking lessons using Zoom. Pre-booking was not necessary for Instagram’s Live, and hence, Instagram users interested in Japanese food and culture could attend or watch online cooking lessons while at home. The users were diverse from family to company, and they used the online cooking lessons as family events or companies’ offsite events during the lockdown. Thanks to digitalization, people who want to learn how to make Japanese food, according to Yuki, feel free to join worldwide, such as from Korea, Norway, and the United States. As mentioned by Cenni and Vásquez, “a virtual cooking class may expand cultural, culinary knowledge” (99). Yuki first overcame the language barrier by teaching it in English, increasing access for more people. She overcame the second barrier, geographical constraints, using digital technology. People interested in Japanese food can participate in her lesson casually from various locations.

Moreover, several examples of making “*Ke*” into “*Hare*” through digitally mediated food-centered experiences were observed. One such example is those people who were ordering a meal kit and making it themselves by watching a pre-

recorded video of cooking or taking a real online cooking class where people can share the experience with friends and family remotely by learning from a professional teacher. AS, who is in a long-distance relationship with another in Japan, says, “the meal kit brings us together by sharing the same tastes of meals and experience and feels like spending time together on our anniversary, although we are physically distancing.” SO also comments positively, “we have a great time for the anniversary during the time that all restaurants and bars were closed due to the lockdown of COVID-19, although it takes four hours to reproduce restaurant menu and need a bunch of plates than expected.” People can enjoy the same menu without sharing the same table or space thanks to digitalization, more efficient distribution, and ideas from chefs. Those experiences and time are intangible and not repeatable and have high participation; hence, it could lessen the people's frustration of mobility restriction, all of which are desired by people during the pandemic. Just as the invention of video and photography made it possible to recreate landscapes, the ingenuity of people and the digitization of food inspired by surviving the COVID-19 pandemic has made it possible to recreate things with authenticity. In this sense, people can easily learn authentic food and culture from around the world no matter where they are due to digitalized mealtime practice.

In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all restaurants were closed, which resulted in many food surpluses and increased waste. In order to overcome this situation, some companies began to package and sell their products, adding the services that provide online *nomikai* between producers and consumers. For example, a Japanese cheese company sold a set of cheeses from five different producers. The company organized a “Cheezoom” event where consumers could listen to the producers' stories and interact with producers while enjoying the commensality of the same cheeses. In reality, even if consumers eat cheese at a restaurant, interacting with cheese producers and enjoying hearing a production story is unrealistic. However, digitalization can create this new experience for consumers, and it can contribute to making closer relationships between producers and consumers even though physically distant. The local food movement has been gradually growing popular in Japan and globally, and the central concept of the local food movement is connecting producers with consumers. People can feel an emotional connection by attending online *nomikai* such as “Cheezoom,” which could be an advanced way of adding value to food-centered activities. The purpose of digital commensality in this context is not only

simply to share the same food virtually as in traditional commensality, but also to create relational ties among participants and share a new experience. People are doing online nomikai on “Ke” days less after the boom ended; however, people have been developing the concept of online nomikai by collaborating new experiences, celebrating remarkable “Hare” days, or supporting producers.

Conclusion

Digital commensality such as online nomikai in Japan reflects a shift of a core value of modern Japanese people for consumption, from sharing tangible things such as food at the same place and same table to sharing intangible things and experiences such as making and learning food. Online nomikai boomed during the pandemic as an alternative commensality and virtual communication place for people who are used to having meals together and communicating in person. Temporary commensality shifted from face-to-face to virtual, and mass media dealt with online nomikai as a prominent commensality and “new normal.” When the number of COVID-19 infections exploded during the first state of emergency, the sense of crisis encouraged people to take every action online, including food consumption and communication, to avoid spreading the virus. According to the interviews, particularly those who felt anxiety, loneliness, and wanted to feel connected during the first states of emergency tended to do online nomikai frequently and for longer hours.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic continuously threatened our lives, more and more people ironically reevaluated that eating together in person is more satisfying. Among adults who can go out easily, commensality in person again became more common; thus, online nomikai is becoming less popular. For many people, online nomikai was just an alternative way to temporarily communicate during the initial stage of COVID-19 to mitigate negative feelings. Many people prefer face-to-face commensality on “Ke” days [ordinary days], which can feel “Aura.” Nevertheless, the interviews reveal that certain types of people prefer online nomikai to normal face-to-face nomikai, and more broadly, they choose online rather than in-person activities. For example, those who have children, especially women, are the people who have to take care of their children even during ordinal times and have very few opportunities to enjoy meals with friends and colleagues outside of their family. For these people, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have been an opportunity to learn about the concept of online nomikai.

They are willing to enjoy commensality in person honestly, but due to multiple constraints, digital commensality such as online nomikai was the best alternative to commensality in person. In addition, online nomikai is more flexible in terms of time, place, and contents, allowing people to prepare their food and drinks based on their choices. This research reveals that those digitally mediated food-centered activities that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic are more likely to have connected isolated people to others, bringing more inclusion to Japanese society. Furthermore, those who cannot meet physically no matter how hard they try, such as those who live overseas, can also find that online nomikai is useful. These people continue to hold online nomikai even after the boom has ended, and online nomikai functions as a new communication tool to overcome geographical constraints.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has been changing the traditional food culture in Japan. For instance, digitally mediated food-centered activities such as online okuizome allow people of different locations and ages to enjoy special moments together online. As mentioned by Nomura, Benjamin's "Aura" of the original masterpiece is no longer present in reproductions (68). People feel reverent in front of the "Aura" of great work in a church, but they have to go to the church to feel so (Nagatani 805). On the other hand, people can easily feel "a little bit pious" in one's home, even with a reproduction of a painting without the "Aura" (Nagatani 805). Similarly, in the Japanese traditional food culture context, people can feel "Aura" through Okuizome when relatives gather at the same place, dressed up in Japanese clothes, and eat together for the child's growth. On the other hand, in the case of online okuizome, although it is hard to feel "Aura," the relatives do not have to gather in one place by doing it online, and more people can attend it easily, which can contribute to preserving a ritual event in a good way as a different level of feeling "Aura" through a non-repeatable experience.

Another major cultural change is that the pandemic has made it possible for more people to use online meal kits or online cooking lessons, reducing the negative feelings associated with making food as part of housekeeping and turning it instead into enjoyment. Digitally mediated food-centered activities have a new aspect of inclusiveness that can be acceptable to engage people with socially-isolated people. Online nomikai, which emphasizes sharing non-repeatable experiences, can be supported by the elderly, people raising children, children who cannot go out freely during the COVID-19 pandemic, or even

people who want to spend a special moment in the long term. Looking at these examples, interaction by digitally mediated food-centered activities has evolved to become more of an “experience” than a mere “commensality or communication tool,” something that stimulates and adds value to our often restricted mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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