Altered Foodways and (Non)Utilization of Technology: COVID-19 and Baby Boomers

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a world-wide impact on people's daily lives. This is not surprising, since the initial safety measures put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic required the isolation of much of the population. With people in the United States seeking to limit their exposure to the virus in 2020, they began to explore new ways to shop and obtain food. According to Kemp, "people's digital behaviors are also changing dramatically as a result of coronavirus related lockdowns," and Edmondson notes that 49% of consumers (n=5,000) surveyed in September 2020 indicated that they are now using online food shopping methods (1).

The Florida Department of State notes that "the continuation and adaptation of traditional foodways in the modern world demonstrates the resiliency and creativity of many cultures that call Florida home." Since technology provides affordances that may change behavior (Gibson 127), examining foodways, as well as the technologies used by society that influence eating practices and routines, is worthy of study. This project focuses on better understanding foodways at the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the (non)use of technology, specifically among the women baby boomer generation living in Florida, and as such, presents a constant-comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss) of respondent interviews conducted with this generation both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Baby Boomers, Technology, and Shopping Habits

In the years immediately following World War II, the United States experienced a rapid increase in births. This baby boom as it has been termed, resulted in approximately 76 million births between 1946 and 1964 (Pollard and Scommegna

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1). Starting in 2011, baby boomers began to turn age 65 (US Census Bureau 1) and there were approximately 71.6 million baby boomers by 2019 (Fry). According to the US Census Bureau, about 52% of the current baby boomer population are women. Florida is one of the states "with the highest proportions of older people," with an elder population of above 15% (US Census Bureau 3). The Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research (EDR) indicates that 83% of baby boomers residing in Florida are white ("Econographic News"). By 2030, all baby boomers will be at least 65 years of age and help comprise 21% of the "elderly" US population (Vespa et al. 1) and the population of baby boomers in Florida will be approximately 36% of the state population (EDR "Population").

Baby boomers are digital immigrants, born before 1980 and not "brought up" using digital technology (Prensky 2). However, they are adapting by both using digital technology and establishing a presence online. While 52% of baby boomers surveyed use tablet devices, their smartphone use is higher at 68% (Vogels). Internet use for baby boomers was reported at 85%, divided between 74% subscribing to broadband service at home and 11% using only a smartphone for Internet access and eschewing broadband service at home (Vogels). By 2017, throughout the state of Florida, computer and Internet access reached 73.2% in households for those 65 years and older (Broward County Florida Planning & Development Management Division 3).

However, these older adults often face challenges with adopting technology (Anderson and Perrin 3), and some express a lack of confidence in their ability to learn and properly use the technology (Horrigan 4). Mobiquity, a digital consulting firm focused on digital products and services for leading brands, surveyed 253 baby boomers about their behavior with digital media as a result of COVID-19, as well as 349 non-baby boomers to provide a comparative measure, both before the pandemic and beyond. Among the general findings, all respondents were very similar in their perspective that technology is proving helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet baby boomers regarded engaging with technology as challenging and less enjoyable than non-baby boomers (Mobiquity 5).

Shopping Habits and Baby Boomers. The majority of baby boomers indicate a preference for conducting in-person business, but they are stepping outside their comfort zone to conduct business digitally (Mobiquity 5). The shopping habits baby boomers have long pursued continue to evolve, and some of this evolution has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns about safety, closure or limitation of store hours, and changes in product availability have precipitated

alterations in their consumer behavior. Baby boomers note social distancing as one of the concerns they have for avoiding shopping inside a store (Jordan).

The supermarket retail model has been dominant throughout the lives of baby boomers. In the years preceding the Second World War, the prevalence of smaller local stores with a targeted product selection constituted the general pattern of shopping (Koch 112). This gave way to the rise of supermarkets owing to changing socio-economic dynamics, including suburbanization and increased prosperity (112). According to Morrison and Mancino, by 2015, 90% of American consumers shop in a self-service supercenter or supermarket for their food. This growing shopping paradigm would become the norm for many members of the baby boomer generation. To illustrate the ubiquity of this model, Koch reports that four grocery retailers in 2013 controlled 39% of the grocery market in the United States, and the top twenty corporations controlled 63.9% of the entire food retail market (112).

This is not, however, the only means of marketing and procuring food. Retail options include natural and artisan shops, convenience and discount stores, online food box and meal kits, farmers markets, and direct farm sales in addition to supermarket and superstore facilities (Edmondson 1, Koch 113). These alternate food sources serve to influence the offerings of supermarket retailers (Koch 113). This effect can be seen in the changes in the variety of offerings in organic food, pre-packaged food, processed food, and drive-through shopping over time. Drive-through shopping is characterized by Koch as consumers ordering by phone or online to later collect the items that have been assembled by the store staff. This construct of drive-through shopping has continued to develop into the buy online pick up in store model (BOPIS), where the customer may collect assembled items from the store's register or a locker or have them brought directly to the car - commonly termed curbside pickup (Jordan).

Curbside pickup blends digital ordering and human interaction in the pickup at the store (Mobiquity 8). Curbside mobile apps have helped businesses, but those consumers who struggle to use such technology may have no recourse but to physically visit a store despite health and safety concerns. This observation is followed by a suggestion for businesses to develop a hybrid solution like 'curbside concierge' – a guided or staffed means of connecting to the digital platform – to help bridge this gap for the consumer (Mobiquity 5). This perspective highlights the awareness of the business community in needing to serve the baby boomer population who face technology challenges and reveals that the technology development is driven in not only a purely altruistic manner of serving the customer

base, but also the continued viability of the business. One example Mobiquity highlights is Walmart, which started their curbside service at the beginning of 2020 and promoted it during the Super Bowl, just prior to the pandemic taking hold in the United States. As an outcome of this effort, Walmart reported a 97% increase in US e-commerce sales in their second quarter earnings data for 2020 and a need to increase available pickup time slots by 30% (8). Walmart is the world's largest food retailer (Koch 112), so the impact of this service reporting is significant to the wider population, though not attributable exclusively to baby boomers.

In 2020, curbside usage for grocery pickup experienced a 431% increase compared with pre-pandemic use among baby boomers, with one-third of the surveyed population now using curbside grocery pickup, as well as an increase in the number of baby boomers ordering groceries either online or through a mobile app (Mobiquity 8, 15). In a separate survey of 5000 participants examining data points in September 2019, April 2020, and September 2020, Food Consumer Insights reports an overall increase in online food shopping use by all respondents rising from 33% in September 2019 to 49% in September 2020 (Edmondson 1). Among baby boomers, the data revealed a smaller increase in online shopping use, from 13% in September 2019 to 29% in September 2020 (Edmondson 3). Both of these surveys clearly document that some baby boomers incorporated technology and changed their shopping habits during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Women and Food Shopping. Shopping, as a part of daily life, takes time. Livingston highlights that among adults ages sixty and over, there are gender differences in the use of time. In particular, women over sixty spend an hour and 56 minutes on cooking and cleaning per day, in contrast to 44 minutes daily for men in the same age group (Livingston). If food preparation is part of the women's routine, then the responsibility for acquiring food is likely part of that, too. Grocery shopping is "denigrated as unskilled or viewed as a leisurely activity" (Koch 117), but its importance remains. In the past, women held the role of food provider in preparing meals for the household members and ensuring a sufficient food supply throughout the year (Ueland 93). Ueland identifies an "unconscious" presumption and acceptance of women knowing more about meal preparation among numerous studies cited, including Marjorie DeVault's book, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (94), which is a particularly relevant source when discussing baby boomers.

In the exploration of caring as gendered work, DeVault expresses challenges in defining a woman's care work with regard to food, electing to use the concept of

"the work of providing food" (4). As an explanation, DeVault seeks to characterize it as "more than just cooking, more than 'meal preparation'" (4). Koch notes that food provisioning is "necessary but unpaid and often unacknowledged labor" (116). Supporting this position, DeVault coopts the term, providing from its use as a descriptor of a husband's activity outside the home to define the work of the woman transforming the earned wage into family meals (4-5).

This study, part of a larger project, addresses the following research question: How are women baby boomers living in Florida experiencing the convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology, and their foodways?

Methods

To better understand how women baby boomers are experiencing their food routines and traditions in conjunction with COVID-19, twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with women baby boomers residing in Florida. This data is a part of a larger study that included more than just women and included pre-pandemic data collected from participant observation, semi-structured individual interviews, and artifact analysis. Institutional Review Board approval and participant consent were obtained prior to all data collection.

With purposeful sampling (Schwandt 128) as the goal for reaching baby boomers living in Florida and that identified as women, a snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit the participants for the study (Noy 330). However, first-contact participants were chosen from a variety of places (e.g., church, neighborhood, job location, previous acquaintance etc.) to start the chain reaction, as a way to counterbalance possible special circumstances (Kvale 92) at a particular site.

Participants ranged in birth years from 1946 to 1964, with some years not being represented, see table 1. During a discussion designed to gather demographic information, about the participants, the interviewees self-identified as white (n=14), Black (n=3), Latina (n=1), or did not discuss their race when prompted (n=6). The majority of the participants were white with an average household income over $60,000; although, the average yearly household income of the total sampled ranged from under $20,000 to over $80,000. The education level of the participants ranged from some high school to earned graduate degrees. With attention to ethical considerations, all participants are referred to with pseudonyms and/or descriptors in this project to protect their identities (Lindlof and Taylor 163).
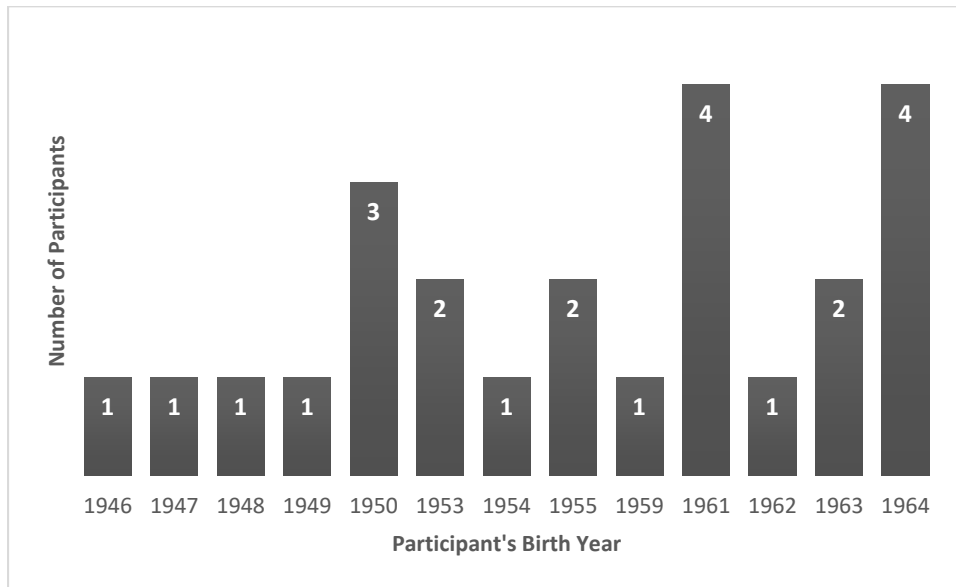
Table 1. Number of participants per birth year

The respondent interviews (Lindlof and Taylor 229) were conducted via telephone or Zoom due to the physical distancing recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("How to Protect"). Questions were loosely organized into an interview guide to help facilitate the conversation with each participant (Gorden 264-265). The interview guide was roughly structured into several sections, including shopping habits and food access, food security, meal preparation, sources of information/media, and community. The interview questions varied, with participants being asked both general and specific questions about their food habits, routines, and traditions, as well as their use of media and technology in relation to food. Interviews averaged approximately sixty minutes in length (35-120 minutes) and each interview was recorded using a digital audio-recorder or the built-in recording feature on Zoom. Interviews were transcribed and generated 415 pages of single-spaced typewritten text/data.

The data was analyzed using an iterative process (Srivastava and Hopwood 77) and the constant comparative method based on the work of Glaser and Straus. The data was initially read in a holistic style to gain perspective on the data. Then, open coding was performed to compare the similarities and differences among underlying meanings in order to categorize the data (Charmaz 341-342). Next, focused coding was employed, which involves the reconstruction of the data by

assessing the context of and the connections among the categories (Charmaz 344). Negative case analysis or analytic induction (Lincoln and Guba 309) was used to help provide validity and avoid a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Memos, considered to be summaries of major findings and/or interpretations of specific areas, were also composed and used to help expound emerging themes (Miles and Huberman 74). Memo writing not only helped clarify major and minor categories, but, from the early stages of research, helped guide the form and shape of my emergent analysis (Charmaz 337). Once new interviews no longer added new value to the identified concepts and the categories and themes seem to be "theoretically saturated" (Glaser and Strauss 110), active recruitment of participants ceased.

This data was analyzed with an eye toward diachronic analysis (Parasecoli 6) and developed an understanding of altered food routines in the pandemic with the guiding knowledge of women baby boomers' pre-pandemic technology use and food routines (Schuwerk). The process of interpreting and classifying data in relation to lived experience is not always neat. Member-checking (Lincoln and Guba 314) was utilized as a way for participants to verify that the themes matched their experiences. There are multiple reasons for what people say and do, and this project is a product of interpretations made in conjunction with a constant comparative method.

Analysis

The participants were asked to describe their technology use, specifically how they interacted with food, food shopping, and food preparation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two major themes emerged from the coded data. The first theme revealed altered foodways in relation to the use of technology for shopping and food acquisition. The second theme uncovered the alteration of foodways in relation to accessibility of technology and trust of new services.

COVID-19 Instigated Technology Use that Altered Food Shopping Routines. The stay-at-home orders and lockdowns during the initial stages of the pandemic, combined with the heightened vulnerability of becoming infected and increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control, "COVID-19 Risks and Vaccine Information") motivated many of the participants to explore new ways of grocery shopping and acquiring food. Even though many food stores remained open as essential businesses during the pandemic and despite them

offering "senior hours" when only consumers that were 65+ years of age were allowed entry, participants reported being hesitant to leave their house to go to a brick-and-mortar store to buy food. While for some, this meant asking someone they knew to buy food on their behalf (to be discussed in a later theme), most baby boomers interviewed turned toward learning to interact with technology that they had not used or, in some cases, even heard of before.

Participants noted that they were uncomfortable going into brick-and-mortar stores to shop for food, so they began to pursue options that allowed for curbside pickup or delivery to their homes. However, to avail themselves of these services, the participants needed to learn how to order their groceries online. Some of them noted that they learned of this option on the televised news, while others heard from friends or family. Deborah mentioned, "I talked to my daughter, who lives up north, and she told me that I could order food online. Turns out, it was very similar to the way I had previously ordered toys online for my grandchildren from Target." Deborah simply logged onto her computer and used a search engine to locate Walmart online and began to order her groceries on the online website. Others, like Linda, learned to use apps, expressing initial discomfort with the technology and the need for assistance. She commented, "I had to ask my spouse for help. He figured out how to download the app onto my tablet – something I had only ever used for reading digital books. Then, I could grocery shop with the app."

Walmart, by a wide margin, was the retailer that most baby boomers in this study cited as the place they used for curbside pickup of food items. Participants also mentioned Target; but, noted that Target restricted curb-side pickup to dry goods only. Barbara was particularly disappointed with this policy, stating, "I really didn't like Walmart before the pandemic. I didn't really shop there much and if I did, it was not for food. I preferred the cleanliness of Target." She went on to note that she rarely even purchased food from Target before the pandemic, relying heavily on a typical grocery store chain instead. However, Barbara noted, "My grocery store didn't offer curbside pickup and I couldn't get fresh produce or dairy products or anything cold from Target. If I wanted to drive by and pick up my food, my only real choice was Walmart."

One of the local grocery store chains, Publix Supermarkets, seemed to be the most commonly cited grocery store for food delivery, followed by Whole Foods. Publix has partnered with Instacart, a retail company that "operates a grocery delivery and pick-up service" (Instacart). Because of this contracted relationship,

ordering from Publix, forced participants into learning how to use Instacart, either through their online or app ordering system. Patricia remarked:

> I had never heard of Instacart before the pandemic. But, I heard about it on the 6:00 news as a way to get groceries. First, I used it online; but, then I figured out that it was easier to share messages and get updates by installing the app on my phone because, you know, I carry my phone around with me and would get notifications from the shopper that I could more easily respond to if it was on my phone.

Several other participants also mentioned using Instacart to order groceries, all of them noting that they had not done so before the COVID-19 pandemic.

A few of the participants tried ordering groceries to be delivered from Whole Foods, a supermarket chain popularly known for its organic food selections. Knowing that Amazon is the parent company for Whole Foods, it makes sense that participants with an Amazon Prime account prior to the pandemic were the ones most likely to try ordering groceries from Whole Foods. Again, some of the participants ordered online using their desktop and home broad-band service, others ordered online using their smartphone, while still others used the Amazon app. Similar to Instacart experiences, the interviewees noted that they had not ordered grocery delivery from Whole Foods prior to the pandemic.

This use of technology, spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic, altered baby boomers' grocery shopping routines. Instead of going to the brick-and-mortar store to shop and select their own groceries, they found themselves using technology, both software and hardware, for a new purpose. The participants also found themselves shopping within the constraints of technology and these new food routines.

Technology Accessibility and Trust of Services Changed Foodways. Analyzing the interview data also revealed alterations in the baby boomers' foodways in relation to the perceived accessibility of food shopping technology and the trust associated with that technology/service provided. Availability and accessibility of technology for the baby boomers in this study played a role in the change to their food acquisition and food choice. Susan noted:

> with some help, I figured out how to use Publix Instacart to have groceries delivered. I did want some things from Walmart and Winn-Dixie that Publix didn't carry. But, you know, Walmart doesn't deliver and I'm not exposing myself at that store. And I don't want to set up an entirely new app that I have never heard of before that Winn-Dixie is using. So, I have to just

> change what I might order because it is too overwhelming and too expensive to try to order from multiple places, with multiple fees, just to get what I would have purchased before the pandemic.

Winn-Dixie is another supermarket chain that is popular in Florida and appears to be using a variety of delivery companies, depending upon location, including Shipt and Uber Eats, delivery services owned by Target and Uber respectively. Susan's unfamiliarity with such services as Uber Eats, presented a challenge in trusting that service to deliver groceries, while her feelings of being overwhelmed with new technology was also a barrier for food shopping. She later commented, "I ended up not eating crackers for several months because Publix didn't carry the brand I like the most and I couldn't find it on the app for another store that I was using, and it was easier to just stop eating them." The combination of new technology, new delivery service, and staying safe in the middle of a pandemic, drove Susan to change her food consumption.

Other participants noted a distrust in the Instacart shopping relationship with Publix due to the costs associated with it. Lisa complained:

> Instacart is so expensive, and I don't understand why. It really makes me not trust what they are doing. Why are there fees for delivery, fees for using the service, a tip for the driver, all while the groceries themselves are more expensive? Why do they need that much money? I know how much my food cost when I shopped at the store before the pandemic and the prices now are outrageous. And I know that it is just Instacart trying to make money because I know someone that still goes to the store, and she said the food doesn't cost that much if you shop yourself. The technology costs too much.

Lisa found herself in a situation where she just could not convince herself to trust Instacart because of the cost. She noted paying the delivery fee, delivery driver tip, service fee, in addition to the mark-up of certain food items and eventually could no longer order groceries from Instacart. It is important to note that the participants rarely made a distinction between the cost of a service versus the cost of technology, as seen in her comment. Lisa went on to lament her loss of cottage cheese.

> I only like Publix brand cottage cheese. It's the only type of cottage cheese I will eat. So, I can't get it delivered now, so I have to find something else to eat for lunch. I always used to have it at lunch and now I am struggling to find something I want to eat at that time of day, I keep trying different things. Right now, it's yogurt, but that doesn't make me happy.

While it is interesting to note that participants in some cases ceased to eat certain foods, others tried to replace routine foods in their diet with alternate food items, and still others navigated the challenge by asking trusted people in their networks to shop for them. Several participants mentioned asking a family member, friend, or neighbor to add an item or two to their shopping list, in the hope they could get a specific desired food item from where their friend was shopping. One participant noted, "It was just easier to let my daughter go to the store for me. I mean easier in the sense that if I let her go for me, she was less worried about my safety since I am old, and I didn't have to figure out how to order food online." In this sense, the non-use of technology helped preserve some of the participants' traditional food routines and allowed them to leverage the trust relationship with their family member.

However, some of these participants still found themselves altering their foodways based on what was actually purchased at the store. For example, Mary explained that her neighbor went shopping at the brick-and-mortar store and was willing to pick up a few extra things for her. Mary said,

> I asked her to pick me up some fresh vegetables. I asked her to bring me some green beans or zucchini, and she did, but she also brought me an eggplant. I didn't even know what to do with it. That's not a vegetable I typically cook at home. I might order an eggplant parmesan at a restaurant or something, but I don't buy it at the store. So, I had to go digging through my cookbooks to find a recipe to figure out what to do with it. I was lucky that I had enough of the other ingredients to make a pretty good dish.

While Mary's situation illustrates how the non-use of technology during the pandemic played a role in changing food habits, other participants explained that they experienced similar substitution circumstances when they had used technology to order groceries online or with an app only to have the item substituted for something different. Deborah, who ordered from Walmart for curbside pickup made note of this:

> I ordered chicken and they substituted a package of two Cornish hens. I allowed substitutions for the chicken when I ordered because I thought I would just get a bigger package or a different brand if the store was out of the chicken I specifically ordered. I hadn't ever prepared Cornish hens before. I mean, they looked like small chickens, but I didn't know if I should cook them the same way. I called my sister to see if she had an idea of how to cook them. She found a recipe and shared it with me. On my next

> shopping trip, I got the rest of the ingredients I needed. The recipe said to stuff them with dates and cous cous, and I had to buy a new spice too. I don't usually eat those things, but I really liked how they turned out, and I will probably make them again.

Deborah's experience illustrates how using technology to order her groceries resulted in a change to her normal foodways. She may now continue to incorporate a new recipe with ingredients and style of cooking that are different from her normal routines.

Implications and Conclusions

Many of the participants in this study now use more digital technology and are arguably more adept at its use. These newly acquired skills and adaptations have formed a new pattern of behavior and a return to previous ways may be unlikely or impossible. After an initial struggle to learn about and adapt to the digital technology allowing them to procure food items, women baby boomers may not want to break their newly established patterns due to the ease of using the technology, the convenience the technology affords, and for some, the independence they gained from using digital food ordering apps and having the food delivered to their homes.

These women also built communication pathways and leveraged existing relationships to learn the technology and maximize the benefits of the technology. This may have strengthened their relationships, especially important during times of heightened isolation such as during the COVID-19 pandemic and what may occur as people age (Skierkowska et al. 647). Learning and adapting to the digital technology may have also helped them become more self-sufficient and independent, as noted above, but is particularly salient if they are able to apply these new skills to other technology in their life.

This paper helps elucidate the experience of US American women born between the years 1946-1964 living in Florida and their (non-)use of technology in conjunction with their food habits, food preparation, and food consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic. As isolation and attention to safety became the norm for much of 2020, technologies altered foodways for this population. Women baby boomers found themselves learning how to order groceries online, navigating a variety of apps for different stores for the first time or, conversely, relinquishing their grocery shopping role to a family member or friend with either a better

understanding of these technologies or a willingness to continue shopping in a brick-and-mortar location. The resilience of these baby boomers in the face of this social and public health crisis has led to a change in their foodways as they found alternate opportunities to interact with others, acquire food, and discover new foods and food preparation techniques. Concurrently, they explored new avenues of technology and its use that may have otherwise been limited or non-existent.

Continuation of this research with specific focus on the wider impacts and longer-term experiences of the participants may be warranted as the pandemic recedes. Looking at how women across other generations experienced their foodways in conjunction with the pandemic and technology is also a direction for future research. Of particular interest is how the lives of women in the baby boomers' network changed and how they experienced their supporting roles. Exploring how men experienced this phenomenon may also be relevant.

Information technologies "hold promise in terms of increasing the quality of life for older people" (Czaja and Lee 341). Adults with "better quality diets" seem to have a better quality of life (Milte et al. 8), and in elderly populations, diet is "among the most important self-care behaviors" (Drewnowski and Evans 93). Adopting digital technologies to maintain foodways, even if altered, may be important for achieving quality diets in this population. Considering that "food and foodways intersect with popular culture in myriad ways" (LeBesco and Naccarato 1-3), continued focus on technology (non-)use may help develop better and more nuanced understandings of how these media channels impact beliefs and behaviors in daily life during this and future pandemics.

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