Family Zoom-Giving   « _ □ x

American Housewife (ABC)

Nailed It (Netflix)

Never Have I Ever (Netflix)

Kim Ahlström

Food, Popular Culture, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

World Food Kitchen

— RECONNECTING —

Ethan Chitty

The Golden Girls (NBC)

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RECONNECTING: FOOD, POPULAR CULTURE, AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Editorial Introduction: Comfort and Popular Culture

CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

Growing up, my family, the Reinhards, owned a golf course and country club. My grandfather built the golf course, and my grandmother cooked the food for the country club. My father worked as the course superintendent, and our house sat separated from the 9th fairway by a thin sliver of forest – which was not enough of a barrier to prevent golfers from walking across our backyard. I did not grow up loving golf, but I did grow up loving the food at our restaurant. My grandfather's brandy-marinated broasted chicken set the standard for any fried chicken to follow, and my grandmother was always experimenting with new dishes. One dish constantly on the salad bar but little eaten, except likely by her and myself, was her candied rice dish.

This dish, from what I can recall, was basically just a mixture of white rice and maraschino cherries from the bar. Served cold, it sat next to her homemade liver pate and pickled vegetables. And I adored it. Years later, when I had cherry *risalamande* in Denmark, I understood that she essentially had made a rice pudding. It was another decade before I recognized why I have so much love for the immensely bad-for-me sweet-and-sour chicken from various Chinese restaurants: those dishes often used a cherry-based sauce that combined with fried chicken and rice immediately brought me home to Sandalwood Country Club. I keep searching for the best bad-for-me sweet-and-sour chicken as my ultimate comfort food because of the nostalgia generated with each bite.

I like to think that Sandalwood, especially the food, served Northeastern Wisconsin in a small way by being a supper club and rural popular culture. That area has other similar local popular cultures based on food: fish boils, all-you-can-eat fish fries, supper clubs, grasshoppers, booyah, cheese curds, old-fashioneds, and, of course, brats served on a truck tailgate. You can travel anywhere in the world and likely find similar strong connections between local communities and their favorite foods. Indeed, celebrity chefs like Anthony Bourdain and Andrew Zimmerman established their brands through such travels that help demonstrate how alike we are even if our dishes are immensely different. Food generates community and popular culture when we use it to connect with each other. Whether the dish is time and location specific, such as those who prefer squirrel in their

booyah, or is a common dish elevated to stardom, such as the humble, squeaky cheese curd, our food defines us as much as it nourishes us.

And when we are under stress, when we are unhappy or upset, when we need a little help coping with life, our food is there for us. Comfort food satisfies cravings for specific flavors, spices, heat, sweetness, fats – but it also helps touch that part inside of us connected to happier thoughts and times. Sharing comfort food helps us explain ourselves to others in ways words never can. They provide a glimpse into our inner selves, perhaps all the way back to that inner child, who remembers eating Cinnamon Toast Crunch with Saturday morning cartoons, or challenging her father to see who can eat the hottest salsa without blinking. Yes, both of those, still comfort foods to me.

Popular culture and fandom often act as coping mechanisms during times of intense stress. People turn to what they love to escape harsh realities, even if just for a little while. Through popular culture and fandom we fulfill a need for control over our lives and a need for connections with other people. Popular culture provides the contexts in which such needs can be fulfilled, and fandom provides the pathways for both to occur. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such coping mechanisms were immensely needed, as people dealt with everything from minor inconveniences due to lockdowns to the major grief of losing loved ones.

The special issue articles presented here provide analysis and reflection on how food and popular culture have provided people around the world with the means by which to cope with the stress, trauma, and grief of the pandemic. From the simple pleasure of being able to eat one's favorite food, to knowing that even in isolation one is not alone, food and popular culture during the pandemic has allowed people manage – and during a pandemic, sometimes managing is all that a person needs.

Comfort itself is neither inherently good nor bad. Sometimes it is necessary, such as during the darkest moments of a pandemic. However, sometimes people's drive to be comfortable overrides over needs, such as public health and safety. A desire for comfort is perhaps seen in those anti-maskers decrying public health mask mandates because wearing the mask was uncomfortable. A downside to comfort is resistance to the common good when the individual's desire for comfort outweighs their perception of what is necessary to help others.

While a minority, such anti-masking mentality exists with its own popular culture online and in conservative news. People are encouraged to resist masking on the grounds of personal freedoms over community safety. And these popular cultures often overlap with those local, rural popular cultures I grew up with, as I

have seen repeatedly in my trips north during the pandemic. Their comfort comes with different foods, practices, and beliefs, all of which become and reinforce their community's popular culture. My nostalgia for Sandalwood cannot blind me to the truths of the gaps between myself and my homeland widened by this pandemic. But I still hope, one day, that we can all gather again with fried perch and rye bread to remember that no matter how different we are, we still have the same tastes in comfort food,

    And that is a good place to start building a stronger community.

Food, Popular Culture, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Special Issue Introduction

TARA J. SCHUWERK AND JESSICA M. PRODY

Coronavirus disease, also known as COVID-19, "is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus" (World Health Organization). The virus was first detected in China in late 2019. The first Centers for Disease Control-confirmed case in the United States was noted on January 21, 2020, and over the following weeks the World Health Organization (WHO), declared a health emergency, with many nations across the globe following suit and restricting global air travel. By March 11, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Following that declaration, the novel coronavirus was declared a National Emergency in the United States, and states began to issue stay-at-home orders (AJMC). Along with these stay-at-home orders, governments mandated facial coverings, required six feet of physical distancing, and forced many non-essential businesses and schools to close to restrict the spread of the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage. As of February 28, 2022, the world has recorded over 435 million novel coronavirus cases and 5.95 million deaths, while the United States as whole has recorded over 237 million cases and 2.85 million deaths ("COVID-19 Data Explorer"). It seems unfortunately clear that the COVID-19 pandemic will be an ongoing health issue. As individuals and governments have struggled to determine how to live with COVID-19, major shifts in cultural practices have occurred to accommodate safety measures and meet the

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needs of a sense of community and control during an era of isolation when we seem reminded daily of our lack of power.

Food is a central aspect of culture. For this reason, it provides a fruitful area of study that can help us better understand the cultural impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Food traditions reflect cultural values, are practices of identities, and help build and delineate community. Food is also a space where cultural and political structures of power are reflected, reinforced, and challenged. Popular culture is a significant space where we can see this broader relationship between food and culture represented.

As Fabio Parasecoli writes in *Bite Me: Food in Popular* Culture, "Pop Culture constitutes a major repository of visual elements, ideas, practices, and discourses that influence our relationship with the body, with food consumption, and, of course, with the whole system ensuring that we get what we need on a daily basis, with all its social and political ramifications" (3). Using Parasecoli's definition, in this special issue we define popular culture as "any form of cultural phenomenon, material item, practice, social relations, and even idea that is conceived, produced, distributed, or consumed within a market-driven environment" (4). The "complexity" and "transitory" nature of popular culture are the very reasons that studying it allows us to better understand the broader cultural change brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (6).

Practices of using food to build community and connection have been disrupted by social distancing and supply chain issues, but through popular culture, old traditions have been maintained in new ways, new traditions have formed, food culture has adapted, and food-focused content has become a tool to build community in an era of isolation. In addition, the economic and political struggles connected to the pandemic have highlighted important innovations in the role food can have during social uncertainty and unrest. Our goal in this issue is to answer two questions: (1) how are people using popular culture to maintain or build community around food and food traditions, and (2) how can tracing popular culture messages and engagement help us to understand the changes in food culture during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The essays in this collection examine how the COVID-19 pandemic allowed people to build communities and resilience, challenge understandings of comfort food, and maintain and remake cultural identities and traditions. Some also explore how technology allowed for the development of new practices for obtaining and consuming food and how chefs and bakers used their platforms to empower

communities and launch challenges to racial injustice. Interspersed within the essays are short narratives written by students in Tracey Deutsch's *Food in History* course at the University of Minnesota. We have included these narratives, because they illustrate how some of the themes that emerge in this issue impact a generation just beginning to find their way in the world as adults. They help us see how these themes appear in the practices of daily life and have lasting impacts.

The personal tone of these narratives, and of so many of the essays included in the collection, highlights how personal food is and how it represents so much more than what we eat. Collectively, the pieces included in this special issue illustrate that food encompasses our relationships with our families, our communities, and our identities. Food and food practices encompass complex emotions and ingrained social power structures. Food also provides space for community building, social progress, reclaiming traditions, and building resilience. The papers in this special issue demonstrate the myriad ways the COVID-19 pandemic influenced popular culture in relation to food and our lives. We acknowledge that one weakness in this issue is that many voices and cultures are absent. Specifically, we would have liked to have included studies that focused on indigenous food cultures and cultures from African nations, Central and South America, and the Middle East. Inclusion of such studies would have provided a more complete understanding of how the COVID-19 Pandemic and popular cultures impacted food practices and traditions across the globe. As scholars continue to study the impacts of COVID-19 on many areas of our lives, we hope others may build on the studies in this issue to explore the global impacts of the pandemic on the relationship between food and popular culture more fully.

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Coping Through COVID Cooking: Nostalgia and Resilience in Online Communities

ASHLI QUESINBERRY STOKES AND WENDY ATKINS-SAYRE

Food speaks to us and serves several purposes when we find ourselves in need, acting as a time-honored and universal symbol of care and concern. We are told to feed a cold; a broken heart may call for a pint of ice cream; and we deliver casseroles and baked goods to families in mourning. Food nourishes our bodies but can also soothe our hearts and our minds. And so, it is not shocking that one of the hottest topics early in the COVID-19 pandemic was home cooking. In fact, Google searches for sourdough, baking bread, and other similar topics increased by 384% during the pandemic (Wolpert). Instacart, Uber Eats, DoorDash, and other grocery and food delivery options brought quarantining households connections to the outside world. Some reported feelings of "fomo-baking," fearing that they were missing out on trends that family and friends were trying, so they too tried creating new things. Junk food sales soared, but so did new interest in plant-based and vegan cooking (Danziger). Gathering in person had ground to a halt at the height of the global pandemic, but cooking became a way to enact community by swapping recipes and creating individual twists on dishes.

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This essay rhetorically analyzes a sampling of popular culture social media engagements with "COVID cooking,"[1] including the rise of Twitter hashtags such as #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking, COVID "CookTok," Instagram posts, and Facebook communities devoted to pandemic cooking such as "Fatten the Curve," to explore the role that food-based rhetoric played during the pandemic. Social media engagement with COVID cooking fostered connection, helping to build pockets of community and fortifying personal and community resilience, but also served as an escapist balm or nostalgic distraction, stifling reflection and reinforcing community borders. Discussions of COVID cooking included themes of nostalgia and resilience, but also reinforced an idealized version of US American food culture, overlooking the roles social class, gender, and race play in accessing and enjoying traditional American popular food culture. Our analysis illustrates how the need to cope through food eclipsed the opportunity to think more deeply about the challenges in US American food culture that the pandemic highlighted. We first describe the unique expressions of food culture through popular culture during the pandemic, connecting relevant rhetorical concepts. We then analyze a collection of conversations to highlight how communities relied on food to help cope with the pandemic's challenges, illustrating how their often individual foci overlooked opportunities to confront community challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 and solidified notions about food in popular culture.[2] We conclude by reflecting on ways in which these forums might be more productive through the connective opportunities that food provides.

The Rise of "COVID Cooking" in Popular Culture

As early as March 2020, media reports about quarantine baking, cooking, and other food and drink related activities began to appear frequently in a host of media. As one article described the level of attention to food, "quarantine cooking made everyone a food influencer. For even the slightly culinarily inclined, cooking – and more so, documenting – became a full on obsession" (Hirsch). Virtual interest in

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[1] We use the term "COVID cooking" when referring to any home food preparation. Although we recognize the differences between baking and cooking, especially the difference between cooking to provide needed food versus cooking or baking for pleasure, this essay focuses more on the community-building possibilities of online discussions of food preparation.

[2] More specifically, we gathered texts from Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram from March 2020 to September 2021, using search terms such as "pandemic baking," "COVID cooking," etc.

cooking and baking exploded, with surveys showing a 120 percent increase in home baking and people eager to participate, complaining, "I'd just feel better if I had a bag of flour in my pantry" (Ellis). Indeed, the emergence of the Flour Panic, with sales of flour skyrocketing 20%, flour disappearing from grocery stores, and accusations of "Flour Privilege" lobbed at those who were able to track it down, also attested to the level of interest in COVID cooking (Mull). Describing people's need to relieve anxiety, pass the time, manage stress, entertain households suddenly sharing space for much longer daily intervals, or make use of limited ingredients, COVID cooking seemed to provide a source of comfort for many. Early research into food choice motives during the pandemic indicates that US adults addressed symptoms associated with psychological distress through food choices that sought solace more than nutrition (Shen et al.).

Baking, in particular, gained popularity, with its focus on process and ritual providing a diversion, sense of flow, and feelings of calm to help process increasingly upsetting news. For some, baking also offered feelings of control and achievement. Although there is limited research on stress baking, studies support anecdotal stories about emotion management, self-care, and stress-reduction through cooking (Brasted). These types of small, creative tasks allowed people to cope with the situation and to feel more relaxed and happier (Brasted). Even early in the pandemic, commentary pointed to the absurdist notion of the desire to bake during a global health crisis; yet, for those who had the time and resources, COVID cooking offered a "coping mechanism that lends some sense of structure in a chaotic world" (Zhang). This renewed interest in baking and cooking would not have happened forty years ago, when US Americans cooked more and ate less processed food. Today, however, as women increasingly enter the workforce and the demands of work increase, and with the easy availability of ready-made breads and other processed foods, more US Americans are less experienced in baking and cooking. The pandemic presented a different way to consider cooking and eating (Mull).

In fact, increased engagement with food during COVID extended eventually beyond digital forums. Chefs, too, changed their habits, starting takeaway services, personal chef gigs, and/or cooking for their communities, with some banding together with other chefs to create "zine-style" pamphlets featuring their comforting new creations to provide to their communities (Ee). Other community initiatives saw people cooking extra meals for those who needed support, organizing through hashtags like #CookforCovid to collect money and supplies. Of

course, as the pandemic raged on, the enthusiasm for cooking waned. Signs of cooking fatigue began to emerge, with sales of prepared and convenience foods rising again (Al-Shalchi). The previously enthusiastic and cooking challenged alike were ready to move on from the cultural obsession with food: "I've gotten to the point with eating where I basically just want a nutrient slurry injected into me," said one Twitter user, while another complained that "I hate cooking now, and I hate that I hate cooking" (Rosner).

Despite varying levels of interest and media attention, the sustained cultural interest in food for more than eighteen months pointed to more than just a need to feed ourselves. Virtual communities offered a way to share food experiences and build connection in a newly physically distanced world. Although general interest in food has been growing for the past several decades, with increased enthusiasm for cookbooks, cooking shows, farmers markets, and local foods, our interest in sourdough starters, banana bread, Dalgona coffee, feta tomato bakes, and "project pizza," suggested that cooking is more than a way to pass the time (Armstrong; Ledesma and Morales). As one chef who began an online open-source cookbook explained, "What I miss is just the physical sharing of food. You go to someone's house […] and you're exchanging knowledge, exchanging stories, exchanging the craft" (Pruden). Early academic research supports these observations. Shen and colleagues found virtual forums increased social interaction through the sharing of knowledge and skills and cultivated feelings of belonging, companionship, and connectedness. These opportunities were able to, in some cases, offset stress that led to unhealthy emotional eating. In addition, COVID cooking forums presented an opportunity to renew older practices and relationships through family meals and recipe sharing, to reconnect to cultural heritage and traditions, and to develop new traditions (Shen et al.). These online forums helped build the connection and community that food often provides, but in ways that emphasized particular dimensions more than others.

As they connected people experiencing isolation and anxiety, online COVID cooking forums increasingly became part of popular culture that rhetorically represented and reinforced our changing relationships with food. Popular culture reproduces traditional symbols for broad audiences, offering easily accessible representations about a topic (Wilson). It produces well-known symbols that become associated with particular themes, taking individual or collective experiences and projecting them on a larger scale, such that particular expressions come to denote the whole of experience (Wilson). Food serves as a particularly

meaningful symbol of culture. As Presswood explains, "Food, and the many ways in which we procure, prepare, consume, and discuss it, communicates important messages about our culture, relationships, and individual preferences or aspirations" (9). We come to associate beignets, chicory coffee, Lucky Dogs, and po' boys with New Orleans, for example, or barbecue and bourbon with broad swaths of the Southern United States. Popular culture is mass culture, however, and is less concerned with authenticity and more concerned with promoting consumption. New Orleanians may now consume chicory coffee and beignets infrequently, for example, but many tourists wait in long lines to experience a tradition that has become symbolic of New Orleans. Popular culture's representations of COVID cooking have similar implications; for example, they may privilege conversations about hobby bread baking rather than discussing how baking signifies hot, back-breaking labor in someone else's kitchen.

Popular culture discussions about COVID cooking thus became representative of a collective experience, whether accurate or not. We read much about sourdough starters or weekend afternoons making the popular cast iron pizza, for example, but these sorts of stories featured particular experiences more than others. Because what is commonly thought of as comfort food became more popular, especially at the beginning of lockdown, discussions about these foods tended to spark nostalgia for childhood foods, family meals, or passed down family recipes. During a global pandemic, it was natural for isolated individuals to seek out this comfort through food-centered social media. COVID cooking forums, too, tended to evoke nostalgia for family dishes and traditions while helping people to feel resilient, more self-sufficient and in-control during a global health crisis.

Food, Nostalgia, and Resilience

Scholars broadly define nostalgia as a "yearning for the past," and a "fondness for tangible or intangible possessions and activities linked with the past" (Sierra and McQuitty 99). Often linked to identity creation, nostalgia sustains and recreates identities, whether someone lives an experience or learns about it, where participating in a story about an object also creates identification (Sierra and McQuitty 100). Nostalgia about food, then, presents an opportunity for connection. Although COVID-19 might have kept individuals hundreds of miles away from each other, even a neighboring household was out of reach during quarantine. Food offered an "essential connection with home" during the pandemic, just as it might

with diaspora (Mannur 27). Food also offers a type of "safe nostalgia," whereby people find a way to initially celebrate shared memories and recognize shared components of an experience, temporarily putting aside troubling parts of history (Stokes and Atkins-Sayre). Celebration of a food offers a sense of connectivity, pride, or achievement, for example, helping people to cope and feel community membership. Lockdown presented this type of opportunity. Unable to physically connect or interact, shared positive memories or experiences with a food provided fodder for conversations, support, and encouragement. In short, food allows people to embrace parts of a common identity while recognizing individual, family, and community differences. Food opens up discursive space between people because it allows particular identity characteristics to be enacted. Although food provides common ground, it is important to understand food as a discourse that offers a framework, not a guarantee, of connection. Using food to rhetorically celebrate shared experiences risks "blending all food experiences into one experience and dropping out all of the historical struggles and inequalities connected with those foods" (Stokes and Atkins-Sayre 90). Indeed, as scholars note, public memory about a variety of topics, not just food, tends to favor one presentation over others.

Nostalgia Rhetoric. Despite the limitations of social media, engagement with COVID cooking served as a rhetorically symbolic and performative way of tapping into nostalgia and public memory to create a sense of community while in isolation. As one person tweeted, "Quarantine = lots of baking and cooking! Those are skills I learned from my grandma and my mom, but the most important part about it is to be able to share with friends and family. That's what it's all about" (@MlleLepa). Banana bread, for example, emerged as one of the most frequently searched online recipes and hashtags during the pandemic (Smith). The staple US American quick bread appeared during the Great Depression out of a necessity to salvage food and use simple ingredients. During the pandemic, people yearned for simpler times. Of course, it may seem strange to long for an era when America was so endangered, but perhaps the fact that the country emerged from the Depression – displayed resilience – is what many people tend to remember the most about that period. As one *Kitchn* author noted, "Baking banana bread feels like an easy-to-reach achievement in a time when we're all feeling defeated" (Paley). Therefore, #pandemicbaking often featured banana bread, serving on Instagram as one of the phases of "isolation stages of grief" (@OfficialKat). Even *Teen Vogue* jumped on

the "gateway baking" trend, explaining, "Instead of a symbol for spiraling out, banana bread shows how we're making the most of our circumstances" (Bergado).[3]

Others used nostalgia for family cooking to feel closer to family members or to build relationships and help others through food. As one poster explained on "Fatten the Curve" (FTC), a Charlotte, North Carolina, Facebook community started during the pandemic that gained international followers, food connects generations but also reaches out to others:

> You see Dough and A Pan of Chicken and Dumplings. I see my 94 year old Grandmas Face and her Laughter and her Patience of her teaching me for years how to make HER grandmas chicken and dumplings from scratch. . . I made this batch for a friend whose family has covid 19 and I find it interesting how a meal can be healing in so many ways ❤️! (FTC, "You see Dough")

Beyond connecting the past to those in the present, many social media food discussions commented on feeling attached to their homes or their cultures through comforting family foods. A common Twitter theme focused on recreating family recipes. For example, one person wrote, "One thing about this year. If not for the pandemic, we wouldn't have a virtual baking day making my great grandma's apple streudel [sic] with my aunt in Colorado. #familymatters" (@robbieschneider). Frequently, platforms featured multicultural family connections, as in one Twitter user posting: "My mother would be so proud! Perfectly circular #Southeastasian #bread #chapatti. The perfect time to reconnect with ones roots #heritage #culture in #quarantine through food. Show me your breads and #cooking from around the world! #Covidkitchen @labcentral" (@ShaziaMir71). Instagrammers, too, celebrated their Taiwanese or Cantonese heritage through dishes they learned to make during quarantine, such as moon cakes or beef noodle soup. "Cooktok," or using TikTok to share recipes and cooking techniques, also reflected these themes of nostalgia for family cultural traditions. One user posted a recipe and "how to" video for her "gramma's" chorizo burritos, traditionally served for her family's Easter breakfast. Interspersed with various family photos, she made more than 70 burritos, showing viewers ingredients and each step, exclaiming her intention to surprise family members with them by leaving the burritos on their doorsteps (@juliiafaiith).

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[3] This example was previously used in a posting on *InMediaRes* by Wendy Atkins-Sayre; http://mediacommons.org/imr/content/baking-memories-during-pandemic.

Another home cook noted that the cooking activities motivated by pandemic-induced nostalgia moved beyond merely recreating recipes and into a more permanent outcome:

> I landed on the idea of writing a cookbook filled with recipes that remind me of my hometown of Chicago, of my family, of happier and simpler times. I grabbed paper and literally started to handwrite the book beginning with Mandelbrot. As I was testing the recipe, it dawned on me that every Ashkenazi Jewish family in America has their own version of this recipe. So, I thought, why not do a series…? (Wojcik)

In some cases, that permanency came in the form of writings, but in others, it was a commitment to long-term behavior changes involving food. As one person tweeted, "The fact that we're all baking like crazy during quarantine demonstrates our dissatisfaction w/the industrial food system. We don't want to be fed. We want to hunt...bake, grow, make!" (@reeetums). Another reflected that cooking more was positively changing her life: "One thing that has changed for me during quarantine is I've actually started enjoying life again; been cooking/baking daily, spending more time with my family" (@AnnaKhoda1). Similarly, Instagram's Black Food Fridays, started in 2020, encouraged followers to be intentional about their food purchases, featuring Black food businesses each week along with culinary history. Although potentially fleeting, the commitment to food-related lifestyle changes beyond the pandemic was notable.

Ironically, even nostalgia for the early pandemic days appeared, primarily posted by those who were able to stay home and participate in a kind of homesteading environment. As one Twitter user said, "I have occasional nostalgia pangs for those innocent early pandemic quarantine days where folks were just like doing puzzles and baking bread" (@finishingahat). Others noted the difference between the novelty of quarantine in the early days versus the grinding repetition that the pandemic brought: "I miss the early days of quarantine when I was feeling creative and hopeful and spent my time baking and crafting and playing guitar. Now I'm just tired. So tired" (@LibrarianPunk). Although many did not have the opportunity to enjoy COVID cooking, for those who were able, the simplicity of the experience was frequently mentioned.

Resilience Rhetoric

Although resiliency rhetoric is increasingly seen throughout contemporary discourse in general, the pandemic saw its frequent connection to people's practices surrounding food. Virtual baking classes or happy hour zooms allowed friends and family to come together, often over a shared, entertaining task, fostering feelings of control, responsibility, and resilience. Resilience is the capacity to spring back from a setback, to recover, or to withstand adversity. The idea of resilience is generally read as a constructive attribute, although it can also be understood as reinforcing a community's negative qualities. Stemming from the Latin *resilire* (to "leap back"), resilience refers to withstanding or recovering from adversity, being strong in the face of threats, responding to challenges with "stoicism," and "toughness," and often, a desire to build community strength to meet other challenges (Bean et al.; McMurry). Writing about the rhetoric of resilience, Jeffery Kurtz explains that discourses centered on this theme provide a framework "from which we might collectively create a kind of fortitude, the realization of a rhetorical imagination with which to overcome these challenges and obstacles that otherwise will bury us where we stand" (719). Nicholas Paliewicz adds to that description, explaining that "resilience has emerged as a rhetorical structure of feeling capable of psychologically uplifting subjects by extracting rays of hope and optimism from dark hours," perhaps even mending "psychological wounds" (3). Because the pandemic left so many people feeling helpless – unable to even leave their homes to find comfort from family and friends or to provide support for those directly affected by COVID-19 – focusing on the positive elements of social distancing provided a balm while also cultivating feelings of control.

For example, many approached the idea of cooking or baking during the pandemic as providing a much-needed break from concentrating on everything that was falling apart at the time. Food preparation served as a welcomed distraction. As Sarah Ostiguy explained on TikTok, "baking is great to distract yourself because it requires a lot of concentration," as she happily bakes cookies, still reminding viewers "but remember it's ok not to be ok all of the time" (@sarah_ostiguy). In fact, TikTok's many CookTok videos provided humorous examples of this theme. They often reused bits of popular culture to offer commentary on their quarantine experiences. One series of posts featured the phrase/recording "You ok there Olaf?" from the movie Frozen, as people stress bake while miming Olaf's response, "Oh yeah, we're calling this controlling what you can when things feel out of control."

Some CookTok users also participated in a popular "IDGAF" dance/baking video challenge that pushed back against the idea that COVID baking would make them "fat," instead choosing to embrace the entertainment that baking combined with social media provides. One young man dressed in a frilly apron danced into the frame holding a tray of blondies, with the IDGAF music and lyrics playing in the background, while another danced into the frame holding a cake, captions reading, "When mom says, 'stop baking, you're gonna get us all fat" and "#can'tstop,won'tstop," and "#quarantine" (@richardspitzz).

Another social media theme featured baking and cooking as community care. As one person explained, cooking provided a way to connect with their communities despite quarantine rules: "Last week I was troubled when I couldn't give a colleague a hug I thought she needed. Figured out that a homemade loaf of banana bread expresses the same sentiment. #PandemicBaking" (@LadyScorcher). Sometimes these expressions reflected sadness as people used food to stand-in for human connection. As one aunt wrote,

> I planned to take my niece and nephew to New York city for the first time this year. We were going to see Beetle Juice, eat NY bagels […] our airline points are on hold while we wait for the world to right itself, but I can sneak up to the porch on Christmas Eve and leave Esse Bagels, flown in from NYC, for them to find. (FTC, "I planned to take my niece").

Despite their difficulties and grief, people became creative in continuing to rely on cooking to connect while in challenging circumstances, "It's family reunion food SUNDAY and although we cannot gather this year James and I are packing up food and making deliveries! Missing all of the cousins today and this deep connection to my Mother and Grandmother! #keeptrack #humanitykindess" (FTC, "It's Family"). Although sharing and talking about food could not replace human interaction, it is noteworthy rhetorically that it became a performative way to express this need. Posters substituted hugs and gatherings with foods that offered a tactile way to remain connected with each other. Food's ability to symbolize memories or particular people seemed especially important in the effort to remain resilient during the crisis.

For others, the focus was on shifting a mindset of helplessness to feeling more in control, displaying innovativeness in cooking in the face of limitations on supplies and suppliers. As one person exclaimed, "This whole quarantine baking and herb garden thing I've got going on is really building up my ego. Like I can just...make things. From ingredients. I can just grow things. With seeds, soil, and

water. WHY does this feel so POWERFUL?" (@EhWhit). Others used what they had on hand to offer their own spin on old recipes: "Old church cookbook or Pillsbury casserole? Can't recall. But combined turkey chili and beans, chopped turkey hot dogs, cheddar and cut biscuits brushed with garlic and parsley butter, along with some creamed farmer's market corn equals a Solid Tuesday Night Yum. And plenty left over to freeze" (FTC, "Old church cookbook"). Online communities frequently shared ideas for "making do" with what was on hand, offering recipe substitution ideas or providing tips such as "10 packets of soy sauce = 1/3 cup. #quaratinecooking" (@BethBinDC). The idea of survival in the face of adversity was a driving force online and was often tinged with humor or wry acceptance, as in, "part of me is kind of glad I get to live through this historic Covid-19 pandemic…I imagine a toothless wrinkly me telling my great grandkids fierce stories of survival with masks, Netflix, and baking banana bread" (@Trixie75). These online food communities create a kind of "collective intelligence," as described by Henry Jenkins (drawing on Pierre Lévy). "None of us can know everything," Jenkins argues, but "each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills" (4). Using the collective knowledge, these communities found ways to remain resilient.

The need to rely on different ingredients also connected some people to their communities' pasts in both painful and celebratory ways. The pandemic offered some cooks the chance to reevaluate ingredients, finding joy rather than derision in connecting with family traditions and practices. Southerners' use of ingredients like Bisquick, for example, are sometimes mocked in culinary circles, but using these "cheap," "inferior," or "inauthentic" items during the pandemic showed people that they could be resilient while creating something delicious. The ability to create these satisfying dishes provided a sense of "making do with what you have" and provided creative ways to connect with family, past and present. Pandemic home cooking became a "powerful vessel that Americans fill with meaning because it represents both the continuity of the past and adaptability of the present" (Dutch). And yet, some struggled with food symbolizing difficult relationships, family histories, or inequality. One person, for instance, tweeted about how food memories made her sad, "We watched a video of my grandma making her signature cookies…video was over an hour long I felt like we were baking with her ☹" (@FabiolaLuevanos). Others noted the preponderance of whiteness and race in dominating COVID cooking trends, asking, "Remember when the quarantine

started and white people instinctively and collectively started baking their own bread?" (@michaelquinones).

Cautions with Nostalgia and Resilience Rhetoric

The rhetorical force of nostalgia and resilience during times of turmoil are apparent from these examples of online community discourse, with many social media users indicating their role in coping during the pandemic. At the same time, each has limitations, particularly in generalizing experience in ways that popular culture then solidifies. In waxing nostalgic, for example, we often favor one story over others and overlook negative experiences, associations, and histories. If the majority of COVID cooking social media posts cultivate feelings of nostalgia by offering memories of satisfying, comforting, familiar dishes, they may omit the difficult legacies they evoke for others. Baking pound cake may be a happy experience for some but serve as a reminder of low wage labor or unequal power relations for others. In this way, nostalgia may mask tensions and hierarchies, offering a false sense of unity (Von Burg and Johnson). As Mannur explains, this yearning for home "can elicit nostalgia for things that never were – nostalgia for a past blind in some ways to the structural inequities and forms of difference that might structure the past" (32).

For example, as Bruckner, Cajic, and Bauhardt point out in their study of food practices during the pandemic, the availability of time, as well as money, often dictated whether people could participate in forms of cooking nostalgia (290). Social media users frequently echoed these concerns. As one tweet read, "I'm an essential worker and don't have the option of working from home and every day I go into work is a mixture of worry that the [sic] could be the way I'm exposed to COVID and also like I'm missing out because I'm not baking bread like the rest of the internet" (@emmymik). Another commented on the unending job of cooking that the pandemic created: "Having a love hate relationship with cooking during quarantine. Love experimenting with new recipes, and at the same time so TIRED of cooking three meals a day!" (@maddiebrightman).

Gender, too, played an important role, with women more frequently taking on a home-maker role. Some nostalgic paradigms about food are dependent on conservative notions about gender and heterosexual, nuclear families, where nostalgic food pining can be romantic. Indeed, scholarship about the COVID-19 pandemic and cooking already points to the danger in the popular gendered

romanticized narrative overtaking memories that reflect a more realistic assessment of how people managed their cooking and shopping needs. Bruckner, Cajic, and Bauhardt write, for example, that women carried the pressure of responsibility and overwork related to food practices during the pandemic, tasked with accessing food, performing extra labor surrounding food tasks, and carrying increased mental loads regarding meal planning (289). Forums devoted to project baking or weekend cooking often featured elaborate ingredients and labor-intensive practices that replicated these gendered forms of social capital and authority, reinforcing gender inequality. Still, posters pushed back against gendered nostalgia. One woman on TikTok posted a video of herself seated in a car with the phrase 'What the Hell?!' playing on repeat, commenting: "When you are in quarantine and realize your family actually eats 23 meals a day/644 dishes a week/2153 more complaints a week/And you have been doing this for a year now" flashed across her dejected face (@suneezy).

COVID cooking forums also privileged whiteness, with some nostalgic musings equating white food culture with US American food culture and overlooking how a variety of communities reconsidered food during the pandemic. This tendency for popular culture to focus on white perspectives is, of course, evident in many forms of art and entertainment (King; Poirot and Watson). The process of white dominance over cultural narratives is evident in discussions about food, too. Lily Kelting argues that food nostalgia operates as a site of erasure, explaining that the New Southern Food Movement, with its celebration of heritage foods and prodigal chefs, creates an "antihistorical fantasy past," that ignores the South's racial trauma and African-American labor to posit a pleasurable, more egalitarian future (362). As Wallach points out, America's white supremacist system is partially constructed through thinking about food in different racialized ways. Often, "classic Americana" is construed as white and prized over other forms. Swapping recipes online through the use of hashtags cultivated nostalgia for "simpler times" that connected some people in virtual environments, but often overlooked how cooking was painful and exclusionary for non-white communities. One person, pointing out the irony of bemoaning cooking at home, wrote, "white people be like 'ugh yeah i've been cooking sooo much for myself during quarantine' and then proceed to make a box of Annie's Homegrown Shells & White Cheddar Macaroni & Cheese" (@pamelaofhoney). The "feel good" COVID cooking online experience thus sometimes had a limited audience, but some users sought to broaden its appeal to more audiences, with Instagram platforms such as

@BlackFoodFridays and @TabithaBrown offering educational, humorous, and comforting posts about the importance of African Americans in US American food culture.

In this way, momentarily "safe" nostalgic encounters did not always remain shallow, exclusionary, or introductory, and were sometimes built into more thoughtful, meaningful interactions. Some posters engaged their positive memories of prized foods to uncover and highlight difficult or overlooked histories for others, recognizing the painful memories that might be associated with a dish while still finding room to connect over its particular qualities. Food serves as an entry point to learn about others in an accessible way, opening up important conversations (Stokes and Atkins-Sayre). Several posts on the Facebook group "Fatten the Curve," for example, highlighted particular ingredients or engaged with dishes in culturally meaningful ways, pointing out overlooked histories or similarities in preparation among different communities. Posting a link to a *New York Times* article about the importance of okra in Gullah Geechee South Carolina culture, one poster remarks that she got a history lesson and a new soup recipe to "elevate (at least my grandmother's) stewed okra and tomatoes" (FTC, "A history lesson"). On the historically African American Juneteenth holiday, the administrator posted an article about "red drink," and the significance of the color red at Black American Juneteenth family celebrations. Readers responded with comments ranging from "thank you for sharing this link – very interesting!" to continuing the conversation in a more reflective manner. Other users also directed members to additional content that would "help diversify our cooking," linking to articles about Netflix's "High on the Hog" documentary about Black cooking, local newspaper series about Black cuisine, and offering histories of ingredients used to create traditional Southern meals on New Year's Day. Similarly, on Instagram's @BlackFoodFridays, K.J. Kearney offered a series of @BlackFoodFacts, teaching viewers about Nearest Green, a Black man who taught Jack Daniels to make whiskey, or about the connection between slavery and Haiti's sugar empire. Although some platforms and channels seemed to invite more diverse memberships than others, engagement with them, in terms of comments and likes, seemed varied and enthusiastic.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that many people cooked and baked their way through the pandemic. The role that the activity played in shaping people's experiences and in the way that the popular culture phenomenon of COVID cooking more generally shaped mediated discussions about the pandemic is still being assessed. That is especially true because, as we write this essay, we are approaching year three of the pandemic with no end in sight. As we enter what many public health experts warn will be the "dark winter" of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, discussions about food continue to play a central role in how we experience the crisis, from serving as mental health activities to catalyzing changes in how we cook in general. Indeed, survey data suggests that people will continue to cook more at home after the pandemic, with data about how pandemic cooking will affect us continuing to emerge (Brasted). Although every national or international crisis invites reactions about how society will change, the interest in engaging about cooking during COVID-19 is rhetorically significant, helping people to cope while simultaneously influencing popular US American cooking culture as a whole.

Perhaps one of the more significant messages from the pandemic was our understanding of the role of online communities in providing support, comfort, care, and community through food. This cultural moment will be marked with memories of baked goods, experimental cooking, and expanded homesteading skills, shared with friends, families, and strangers through pictures, stories, and videos. As one online poster wrote,

> Where does a Facebook group devoted to community and cooking during these times fit into all this, and why does it matter at all? I'll tell you. Despite all the crap that social media can funnel into the collective conversation, the ability to meet friends, and friends of friends, and complete strangers in a welcoming place to cook and commiserate has been a small saving grace. At least for me. (FTC, "2020 was the worst")

Through themes of nostalgia and resilience, these online communities created a feeling of closeness despite distance, brought many back to their cultural roots, changed some lives for the better, and showed how innovative people can be in times marked by stress and limitation. Online COVID cooking forums often noted the difficulty of isolation, but food, in particular, seemed to play an important role in bridging the gaps between people. From organizing porch drop offs, stimulating

conversation, or serving as commiseration, it was food that often symbolized connection.

The tendency for online food communities to focus on nostalgia and resilience during the pandemic also influences broader popular food culture. The sheer volume of people commenting on recipes, offering reviews of meal services and take out, and simply trying new things or learning to cook more during the COVID-19 pandemic makes food culture less elitist, more accessible, and more reflective of different cultures. Online culture in general has shifted perceptions of expertise, invited more to participate, and offered new forms of expression in terms of platforms. Working together, online communicators create a collective intelligence that challenges "traditional assumptions about expertise" (Jenkins 52). This trend is particularly observable in online COVID food forums. Other users challenged the "chef centric" characteristics of food culture, with home cooks using short TikToks to teach others and challenging the idea that they needed special ingredients to succeed. Brand new cooks and chefs alike engaged with COVID cooking and food culture on social media, with media coverage of the phenomenon reinforcing this interest, gradually attracting more people into the cultural conversation about food.

Still, the intense interest in food during the pandemic may have broadened access to food culture in some ways, but firmly policed its borders in others. Stories featured in news articles and on social media primarily featured individuals happily embracing the idea of slowing down and going back to the basics, excluding a large swath of our communities. People who never stayed home from work or who were out of work and without income for the lifestyle, those who had no positive memories of the kind of lifestyle celebrated in the discussions, and those who were too sick or tired or worried or grieving to participate in that world found no solace in these pandemic activities. Similarly, in our research, the overall media characterization of pandemic cooking tended to be white, female, and affluent despite vibrant social media multicultural engagement. White women continued to be the featured (home) cooks, not Black chefs, Latinx food bloggers, or Indigenous food activists, who were also working to use food to support their communities during the pandemic. All are limited by the typical popular culture representation of COVID cooking. In at least these two ways, the COVID cooking phenomenon put the borders of communities into stark relief.

In addition, the attention on particular types of food culture risks eclipsing other stories, sedimenting popular culture surrounding the pandemic in limiting ways. If

the preponderance of stories showcased white, female, plucky cooks happily making do, even if frustrated or lonely, the tragedy of the pandemic is dulled, softening the edges of its lessons. Social media posts were far less concerned with how people suffered increased food insecurity during the pandemic, for example, or how some communities' food traditions were appropriated by others. Posts about connecting with loved ones or new friends online through food also becomes its own nostalgia, where we focus on memories of cooking our way through the pandemic rather than on the great suffering the virus caused. And, of course, attention to food is limited in itself as a coping mechanism; as one person cautioned on Twitter, "How amazing would it be to see white people put as much energy and intent into being anti-racist as they did into baking quarantine sourdough?" (@WalshYourself). Indeed, culturally-specific online cooking content offers background into traditions and prized recipes, but, as Black Food Fridays does, more outlets might suggest tangible ways for readers to support communities beyond cooking.

Ultimately, then, our research illustrates that the COVID cooking phenomenon fulfilled a much-needed coping function but is incomplete. It offered an outlet for connection and creativity for some through its focus on nostalgia and resilience. It helped broaden access to food culture for new audiences through new platforms and different types of conversations. Overall, though, we needed to learn more about the variety of ways food fueled our collective need to carry on during a difficult time and helped to build a more resilient community as a whole, not just for white women dropping off sourdough starters to their friends. COVID cooking social media engagement offered moments of joy, humor, education, and hope. The reach of food popular culture is broad, however, sending out echoes of a familiar narrative. We risk forgetting many important stories about pandemic survival in favor of those only featuring the nostalgic cocoon of a warm, comforting, COVID kitchen.

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Pandemic *Pets de Soeurs*: Connecting French-Canadian Food, Culture, and Nostalgia Online

KELLY BOUDREAU AND MARC OUELLETTE

From traditional, celebratory feasts to "game day" food rituals, food is something that connects people, families, and communities. But what happens when people are bound to their homes and cannot meet up to share in these social bonding food rituals? For many, they turn to sharing their food on social media. Of course, sharing food pictures on social media is nothing new (Abbar et al.; Rousseau), but during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 global pandemic, there was a shift from hosting family dinners in person to sharing pictures of food on social media

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an influx of social media posts and images of people baking bread for the first time, sharing stories of their first sourdough starter, and revisiting recipes familiar from childhood (Easterbrook-Smith). Indeed, these recall McLuhan's axiom that "the medium is the message" in so far as the digital platforms mediate and shape the experience in and through the sharing (23). Simultaneously, the scarcity of certain items invokes not only the primacy of staples, but also reveals the bias of the mediation and its accessibility in attempting to produce authentic versions of traditional recipes (Innis, *Empire* 23; Innis, *Bias* 6). French-Canadian ex-pats like us, living in the United States and elsewhere, can turn to *L'encyclopédie de la cuisine* by Jehane Benoît or *The Acadian Kitchen: Recipes From Then and Now* by Alain Bossé as a source of nostalgic authority. The simultaneous needs to provide and to "make do" during lean times overlap with the need to connect with others while also providing a

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playful alternative to the *de rigeur* performative element of posting to social media as simply "doing it for the 'gram" (Vautier 1, 56).

More than a time filling activity, over the course of the pandemic what people were making revealed deeper connections to their personal histories and a sense of nostalgia (Gammon and Ramshaw). Sharing images of the food in various stages of preparation and offering the recipes online serve to maintain family and friendship bonds as well as the cultural memory of a home with which we are no longer geographically connected. Thus, the combination of social media and food creates an opportunity to rethink the performance of ritual (Tambiah 126) and the ways symbolic consumption "can evoke personal nostalgia and community pride" (Shortridge 507). Here, the individual can simultaneously "collect and extract portions of their culture" in the role of what Heldke calls the "food adventurer" while also being the source of the nostalgia (42). Within this context, the social media approach highlights issues of keeping score and collecting achievements through the accumulation of posts, likes, and comments. While a focus on likes alone frequently becomes indicative of the outcome becoming the rationale, this need not be the case. Here, as Faucher explains, the like button becomes perhaps the most familiar current example of McLuhan's frequently misunderstood axiom, "the medium is the message," whereby the medium becomes more important than the ostensible content and, indeed, becomes the content (24). Said another way, there is a temptation to only produce and consume the like button for the sake of the like button, but we found a different result. Social media posts are often framed around accumulating likes and keeping score, gamifying the social experience online, with an emphasis on the shared aspect (Lampe; Peyton).

The social media interactions we experienced reflect a playful and performative means of passing cultural and ethnic traditions from one generation to another while turning cultural identity into a presentation of the "ludic self" on social media (Deumert 27). This becomes significant because this kind of performance lends itself to light-hearted interactions and relating to others in a playful manner and documenting that experience. These sorts of playful phatic gestures, reflecting the ability of the medium to change the scale, pace, and pattern of interactions, offer a key means not only of maintaining but also establishing new friendships and contacts through periods of jarring transitions and interruptions.

On Method and Context

The convergence of social media, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the topic of food occasioned the discovery of the extent of the authors' shared cultural experiences and nostalgia around the recipes they grew up with. This article is grounded in an autoethnographic approach, which can be defined as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience. […] A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product" (Ellis et al. 1). This approach enables the authors to delve into their separate personal histories and connections with traditions around French-Canadian recipes stemming from two connected, yet distinct lived experiences. It is important to recognize that while French-Canadian culture is sometimes viewed as a homogenized one from the outside, the traditions and vernacular vary depending on the different French-speaking regions in Canada (Moogk). This is clearly exemplified in each author's section detailed below. While both authors identify as French-Canadian, they hail from different parts of Canada, and as such it is important to acknowledge the role of autoethnography in situating the central ideas of tradition in this article.

Autoethnography permits the authors, both professors teaching and researching within an academic frame, to not only reflect but to connect their cultural histories and lived experiences within the broader scope of the literature on media, play, and nostalgia in an informed manner that is indeed, both "process and product." While the role of professor is one of privilege in our society, it does not negate the lived experiences and deep connections to the culture and traditions of the authors. As Ouellette iterates, while the opportunity to discuss the recipes reflects his current position as an academic, he writes elsewhere that this is never done without some nod to his multiple and simultaneous roles as a husband, father, and someone from a working-class background. These were the recipes with which he grew up, because his mother, the oldest of nine and told to leave home at eighteen because the family needed her bed for the last one, learned of necessity to stretch food and pennies. In contrast, Ouellette's father, though an educator, grew up with the significant stigma of a single-parent home in a French-Canadian Catholic community in southwestern Ontario in the 1950s. Ouellette's paternal great grandmother, who took in washing to supplement the income from his great grandfather's carpentry and other seasonal work, was the one who baked and

stretched the precarious budget. Given that the first dozen years of Ouellette's academic career were precarious ones, frugality remains as more than a memory, and food offers a material connection to each generation and those memories.

For Boudreau, only one of three individuals from both sides of her extended family to go to university and the only one to go beyond a bachelor's degree, the connection to the food and recipes described below is not simply a form of nostalgia for some long-lost Acadian culture but is the very real experience of being raised by parents who were married at sixteen, bearing two children by the age of eighteen. Her mother, always making sure there was enough for everyone who came to their table, taught Boudreau how to be frugal with ingredients and how to stretch a meal without sacrificing flavor or tradition. This was a lesson that Boudreau has carried close with her as she entered her first years of university as a single mother, and one passed on to her daughters. As an academic, Boudreau values the skills she learned to critically reflect on those memories and situate them within the context of French-Canadian and Acadian food traditions so often borne out of scarcity and necessity.

From these situated autoethnographic perspectives focusing on the authors' experiences with cooking and sharing traditional recipes and pictures from our shared background on social media, this article will explore the connections between a resurgence of cooking traditional and nostalgic recipes during the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of social media as a shared space to connect with others when physical gatherings are not possible, and how the playful and performative nature of social media reshapes the traditional patterns of interactions and   cultural   framing   around   making   and   sharing   of   food.

Playful Social Media

Mapping out such an approach occurs in and through the simultaneous centripetal (inward) and centrifugal (outward) movements inherent to any playful performance. Following from Brenda Danet, Deumert develops the concept that there is a "primacy of play" in online interactions and that the "playfulness is visible in the types of interactions people engage in online – they play games, joke, flirt, or just hang out with one another – as well as in the language and multimodal imagery they use" (23). Here, Deumert is indebted to de Mul's earlier work in enumerating the ways a ludic identity both differs and proceeds from the established practice of considered identity as produced in and through scripts and

narratives and their performance. As de Mul elaborates, games do not have the same sort of closure as other narratives. This becomes a key entry point for understanding social media interactions as a kind of ongoing play or game, because games "that have no or hardly any narrative content [...] invite us to play again" (259). Indeed, the call to play again reflects the fact that games are "insistent" technologies, as Ruggill and McAllister highlight (9). The same can be said for social media, which insist on interactions through constant notifications and status updates.

Moreover, they are always on. Even though a series of likes or impressions are not precisely a "win" or a "loss" criteria, they are very clear indices of the building of an audience and collecting their responses or engagement. Thus, what Deumert calls the "ludic identity" develops through "an image of who we are – for others and for ourselves – through the way we act, move and dress, the music we enjoy, the food we eat, the beliefs we hold and the stories we tell" (24). Here, Deumert draws heavily on de Mul's earlier theorizing of the ludic identity, for which he argues, "In the case of ludic identity the predominant tendency is an increase of openness. [[...]] ludic identity is a creation of our imagination that creates real life effects in our daily lives" (261). It is this last aspect that is key, particularly in performing the social media exercise of sharing recipes and the results of baking them, as well as the responses in the comment thread by friends and family who support the posts and reinforce the shared social and cultural imagination created through social media.

In terms of the ritualized aspects of playfulness, Tambiah cites Huizinga and the "magic circle" of play to highlight the dual aspect of ritual as performance. Ritual, then, reproduces via repetitions, copies, mimicry, seriality, and iterative processes, but importantly, "no one performance of a rite, however rigidly prescribed, is exactly the same as another performance because it is affected by [...] certain variable features such as the social characteristics and circumstances of the actors" (125). Here, the dual aspect of ritual as performance maps onto the dual aspect of interactivity that Deumert argues is essential to the playfulness of online interactions. In the first case, we can participate in what appears online, as opposed to being mere consumers. In the second case, since everything appears in an always already social context, "we are always also responding to others and their representations" (25). The result is a "playful, experimental, yet social, state of mind" (26). This becomes particularly important in the current context since, as Deumert elaborates, there has been a "general ludic mood in the digital world from its inception" (26). She attributes an *a priori* playfulness in digital spaces to the

subculture of hackers, gamers, and programmers whose playful use of language –
notoriously "spam" which was borrowed from a *Monty Python* sketch – has
contributed to "the ritual construction of the internet as a place of enjoyable and
playful interaction" (26). Thus, the medium is not in and of itself the driving force
underlying the process. Rather, it is the ritualized, social, and playful interaction
that occurs in and through the medium that is at the core of the experience.

Pets des Soeurs and Playful Pandemic Postings

One of the things that even the most experienced and well-intentioned Cultural
Studies scholar can forget or overlook is the transformative potential within any
definition of transculturation. The potential for positive transformation occurs by
virtue of the fact that transculturation involves both choice and necessity, but –
contrary to an understandable assumption – necessity need not be the result of an
imposition of hegemonic power. This is not to say that the necessity created by
depression, pandemic, drought, wartime rationing, and other times of extreme
shortage are not horrific, but rather to offer a reminder that sometimes necessity
can be so simple as running out of shortening when the shops are closed or the
ingredients are simply different where you moved, or all of the above.[1] The change
in food traditions and recipes happen over time through generational contexts that
are shaped by a wide range of influences both locally and globally including the
socio-economic situation of those making the food. Yet, even when hardships are
no longer the backbone of necessity, the recipes and their ingredients reflect those
hardships (Cashman & Farrelly).

Given this knowledge, (at least) two things become clear. First, "authentic"
always entails a willingness and/or an element of using what is at-hand, a feature
of games Conway and Trevillian adapt from Heidegger to highlight competency
and the limits of intentionality. Second, following from the first, there is an in-built
element of play and/or playfulness in the process (70-72). Indeed, this is part of the
nostalgia of passing along the recipes and the process, if not the results, to our
children and/or friends. Whereas certain platforms emphasize the final product, the
era of the "live tweet," or "Twitter thread," Instagram Stories, and posts, as well as

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[1] In the United States, margarine has milk products in it, Crisco™ shortening has a different
formulation, and milk has an acidic preservative in it. These affect the taste and the texture of baked
goods as compared to the original, Canadian recipes.

Facebook comment threads, allows the process to unfold. As Rob Gallagher explains, users of digital media "express themselves via "autobiographical performances" and playful acts of self-presentation, from selfies, blogposts and tweets to videogame "Let's Play' videos" (3). This creates an environment built on a sort of spontaneous call-and-response model which is "manifest in the multiplication of feedback mechanisms (likes, follows, subscriptions, replies, retweets)" (3). In this environment it is not so much the outcome as the process that matters, opening the possibility of playful, often asynchronous, interactions that unfold over time. Play in this context emphasizes the ability to adapt to new roles and contexts. Gallagher concludes, "Flexibility becomes a key attribute: as consumers, digital subjects are expected to seek out new products and experiences; as professionals, they are required to adapt to the changing needs of a volatile labour market; as performers they are expected to keep their personal brands fresh and relevant" (3-4). Certainly, adaptability and using items at-hand applies to baking. No two recipes (and rituals) exemplify the variety of aspects – playfulness, transculturation, enculturation, and authenticity – like *pouding au chômeur* and *pets de soeur*. Indeed, the playfulness is in-built owing to the names themselves. In the first case, the meaning derives from the second half – *Chômeur* is directly translated to "out of work" or unemployed even though its "official" history suggests it was created by women working in factories during the early stage of the depression, and in the second case, *pets de soeurs* means "nun's fart," after all. [2]

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[2] Here, it is worth nothing that the "*au*" in the recipe title sometimes appears and sometimes does not and sometimes spellings can be variable on handwritten recipes descending from grandparents, like Ouellette's, who might not have completed elementary school. In addition, as Boudreau notes, "growing up, we had a handwritten recipe called "Arseholes," in New Brunswick." It also has the name, "*Grand-Père au Caramel*," in Québec. Both of these, as with pouding au ch*ômeur* and *pets de soeurs*, reflect the connection between food and socio-economic status through the use of crass recipe names that reflect the vernacular of the lower class. Even the regional accent of the speaker can be cause for social approbation, no matter the content of the speech.

Baked Beans & Bread: Boudreau's Social Media and (Failed) French-Acadian Traditions[3]

Within the French-Acadian tradition, the recipes often share the same name, but the ingredients and histories differ. There is not necessarily a definitive recipe book that frames the recipes within a unified French cultural context. The history of the maritime provinces of Canada, which are partly known as Acadia (or Acadie in French), where I grew up, has an intertwined culinary history with French and Irish settlers, influencing the ingredients and processes. While the handing down of recipes through families is not unique to this region, the "bibles" of local recipes often derive from churches charity drives made up of curated "family recipes" from the local community and tell the story of the local ingredients and their histories (Ransom and Wright). Many of these cookbooks have been handed down through generations, often resulting in the ingredient list being technically the same but the contemporary formulations differing, often resulting in the need to tweak the original recipe based on memories of taste with current ingredients.

Baked beans is one of the many recipes that is often found in most of these church curated collections. Of course, baked beans are not a French-Canadian specific dish, but there are regional variations. Growing up, it is something that my mother would make during the long cold winter months. It was an economic meal that would sustain our family for an extended period and was an addition to any meal of the day. My mother's recipe was an adaptation of one from a recipe book she bought from her parish many years before. The beans were light, the molasses-based sauce was thin, and besides beans, the secondary ingredient was onions. Several decades later, my stepmother, who hailed from Labrador, a northern province of Canada connected to Quebec, introduced me to her family's baked beans. Hers were dark, rich, with a thick molasses sauce and the secondary ingredient was bacon. Lots of bacon. It is probably no surprise whose recipe I preferred. Whenever I would visit home as an adult, my stepmother would always make me a large batch of her baked beans. For Christmas several years ago, she gifted me a cookbook from her local church community with the recipes she grew up with, including the one for baked beans that were made for me.

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[3] This section details Boudreau's experiences using an autoethnographic account. Thus, the first-person and other references reflect her experiences throughout this section.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, no longer able to make the pilgrimage home due to stay-at-home orders and border closure es between Canada and the United States I tried to make the recipe in the cookbook she gave me. I shared my progress on Facebook, chronicling the entire process with photographs, tagging my stepmother in the post. The first attempt failed spectacularly, as the instructions were vague. After a few failed attempts, and some comical comments on my Facebook post, I came to realize that the recipe was not something to follow, but something that lived in the memories of those who made it and wrote it down to share with their community with the expectation that everyone already knew how to make it. After a few calls home, looking for help with the recipe, my stepmother could not articulate exactly what she put in her version and how much of the things she did know. But she knew how to make it by instinct and memory, and it always turned out amazingly delicious. It took me at least five attempts, tasting and adding a random amount of various ingredients to get it to taste almost, sort of like how I remember it. As a shared social media post, friends asked for the recipe (see Fig. 1) and shared their own variations creating a shared experience around nostalgic flavors of our localized pasts.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, bread making burst onto the social media scene with a vengeance (Easterbrooke-Smith; Mohabeer), and I was no exception among the crowd. Though bread was still readily available in the stores (luckily not one of the things that fell victim to shortages), yeast and flour were not. In the late spring months of 2020, many baking ingredients were sparse due in part to supply chain issues and panic buying/hoarding by those who had the means. I recall finding a 20kg bag of flour that I bought and divided up among my adult daughters and me. When my son-in-law found a baker's block of yeast, I made him buy two. Even though I had always baked growing up and taught my daughters how to make cakes and knead dough, it was something that had often fallen to busy schedules, left for special occasions and holiday seasons.

Figure 1. Community cookbook, recipe, and failed baked beans

As my Facebook and Instagram feeds filled up with sourdough starters, artisanal breads, and fancy focaccias, I yearned for my mother's homemade white bread. My parents married very young, and we grew up in a world of homemade and make do. I called her for her recipe from an old *Five Roses Flour* recipe book. She took a picture with her phone and sent me the recipe – complete with her notes in pen from so many years past.[4] The recipe called for milk, but my mother said she used to use water in the early days to save money, but that milk really was better for the taste and texture.

Eager to share my pandemic breadmaking experiences with my friends and family, I documented my progress, took photos, and posted them to Facebook (see Fig. 2). Like every social media post, comments ranged from support to sharing of their own family recipes and the many versions of nostalgia that came with it. These posts were never intended to be about accumulating likes, but rather to share

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[4] This is the same recipe book Ouellette's mother has, despite being in English only, and which she passed along because she never made bread.

personal memories with colleagues, friends, and family who were all isolated due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2. Bread baking framed for social media.

The candid and amateur nature of the photographs and brief write ups in personal social media posts were in stark contrast to the recipe blogs and Instagram accounts that weave the recipe through an often-verbose narrative and professional quality food shots (Cesiri; Lofgren). Unlike the more carefully constructed recipe sites with full narratives built around the process of baking/cooking, the playful and performative nature of social media contributes to a sharing and reshaping of traditional patterns of interactions and cultural framing around making and sharing food with friends and family. Through the sharing of memories related to food and the attempt to recreate them during times of isolation, there was a sense of socially networked community regardless of cultural background or geographic location. For me, and many others we spoke to, these posts were the closest things to kitchen conversations and family dinners many of us would have, which helped us feel connected to a home that we could not, even temporarily, return to.

Playfully Sweet: Ouellette's Social Media, Desserts, and Substitutions[5]

Pouding au chômeur is essentially a simple sponge or white cake with a syrup or sauce. Here, there is a pun on sauce, which can also refer to gravy. The dessert may include apples – if available – on the bottom, along with the sauce, which can be made from brown sugar or based on maple syrup. The key is that it is simple, quick, and has few ingredients. One series of live tweets, for instance, caused a minor controversy among my followers because I included apples on the bottom of the cake. Not everyone's grandmother did this, but it is among the "official" recipes of a dessert that should never actually become a codified, a process Tambiah calls a "marriage of form and content" and indeed has regional variations that are based on local availabilities (129). Interestingly, the website for the popular celebrity chef Ricardo Larrivée lists a recipe with and another without maple syrup. This is important because including both recipes shows recognition that the formulation of the recipe is at once spontaneous and conventionalized. It could also be considered an inclusion effort, as maple syrup is more costly than a simple brown sugar sauce, and there are other regions of French-Canada where traditionally maple syrup was not as readily available as it was/is in Québec. No two examples of a *pouding au chômeur* will be or even can be identical. They are meant to be improvisational and to use whatever is on hand, or at hand, which Conway and Trevillian explain is an essential component of play, as opposed to a game (71). No two apples are the same. Here, the process is as – if not more than – important as the outcome.

The very contingency of *pouding au chômeur* (and also *pets de soeur*) is to use what is available. My mother's recipe reflects the dual aspect, one which echoes the duality of subjectivity: one is at once the thinking subject but also subject to external forces such as time, scarcity, and limited resources. There is a minimal amount of salt, sugar, and spice. Indeed, the last ingredient is an optional ½ teaspoon of nutmeg. When I make the version with which my kids are familiar, there may be cinnamon, ginger, allspice, and nutmeg, as well as honey drizzled over the apples and ice-cold butter grated over that. Moreover, at an early age, my son Pascal decided that his trucks could accommodate the spices (see Fig. 3). As Ouellette writes, this becomes a means for spontaneous, free play to become scripted and pedagogical (n.p.). Pascal eventually decided that he would make his

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[5] In this section the experiences refer to Ouellette and his family specifically and this is reflected in the first-person references and references to family members.

own pre-mix of "secret spices" in an empty spice jar, but it had too much salt in it for the amount of other spices. Even so, it was used in apple pies instead, because it produced a salted caramel effect, one which reflects the adapting tastes of our children and the developing of popular tastes too. In this last regard, "sea" salt and caramel has become a relatively common flavour and reflects the processes of global capitalism and its role in shifting food tastes.

Figure 3. The author making *pouding au chômeur*

Similarly, the ready availability of multiple spices reflects the changing expectations and availability of ingredients thanks to globalization (Adams and Collinson-Jones). Moreover, the addition of fat – here in the form of butter instead of lard – reflects not only changing economics but also changing locations. Although it is a popular myth that everything is cheaper in the United States, even accounting for exchange, this is not always the case. However, one of the more dramatic instances is milk products, with butter being roughly half the price in the United States as compared to Canada. Conversely, margarine is several times more expensive in the United States because all-vegetable margarine is rare and hard to find. Thus, we find ourselves cooking with far more butter in the United States than we did in Canada. All of these have come to the fore not only in adjusting the

recipe(s), but also in terms of people's responses to the varying social media threads and posts.

One of my former students commented on the salty caramel flavour always being a winner, regardless of location. However, the apples in the *pouding au chômeur* met with some approbation from a colleague on Twitter, who reacted with "that's not how I remember pouding au chômeur" (Neveaudit).[6] In fact, what happened was more of a continuation of an earlier online conversation about sourcing ingredients and as well as a recipe to fit them. The ensuing searches resulted in finding a recipe in French and Madame Benoît's recipe, among others. The latter becomes more important as a resource, as a history, and – to accurately and properly use the currently fashionable term – a curated collection of French Canadian and/or Québecois recipes. Madame Benoît's recipes stand as the sort of indexical symbols Tambiah describes as central to significant cultural rituals (128).

Moreover the social media posts become playful versions of the Austinian speech act, whereby the utterance is its own performance. Here, the performance includes multiple and simultaneous layers including parent, play, Canadian, French-Canadian, Franco-Ontarien – as we learned – and a social media presence. At the same time, a key contradiction emerges insofar as we were trapped in our home because of the pandemic, and we were trapped in a foreign country by virtue of Visa rules and the closure of international borders. Sharing and discussing baking online was our connection to home, a sort of one-way phatic gesture to establish contact with "home" in the imagined sense and to provide a record of what we did and how we did it. Indeed, this lies somewhere in a liminal space between oral and written traditions since the recipe is ultimately a guide. Making it is passed on through the performance of the recipe, but that always includes deviations, adaptations, and variations.

Having seen and studied the phenomenon of "doing it for the 'gram," (Vautier 1, 56) each picture went from being legitimately candid or spontaneous to being carefully composed and surreptitiously spontaneous. Among our earlier such posts were entirely playful and spontaneous images, including a catalogue of "worst dad moves," such as Pascal using a toy dump truck to funnel chocolate chips into his mouth and a flour handprint on mom's black leggings, among other things.

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[6] This account was later suspended by Twitter after radical right-wing trolls attacked the owner, but a screenshot of the post has been archived.

As posting continued, the images became more staged. The comment from a colleague that she likes the tea set reflects the planning. Admittedly, the teapot has never had tea in it, and the saucers are rarely used, except as weights when we make something that needs compression while curing (see Fig. 4). Thus, we find ourselves knowingly conforming to multiple and simultaneous sets of audience expectations. There clearly are rules, and we delight in playing with them, including knowingly and admittedly using a tea set only for the purposes of social media posts, mimicking the "staged candid" shots of influencers. While the obvious aspect is to highlight the differences between *ludus* – games and play with rules – and *paidia* – free play – at least two other features of play emerge in and through the sharing and the responses.

Figure 4. The tea set that only emerges for pictures

Indeed, one of the key aspects of social media that intersects with games is that the core elements of insistence, building, exploring, and collecting apply (Ruggill and McAllister 9). Social media insists that you use it, via the routines of notifications, responses, and checking for both, but also through the score-keeping routines of building a follower base and collecting likes. However, it is also worth noting that these become part of the "metaplay" aspects, which Hamari and Eranti define as user-defined achievements and/or achievements outside the actual gameworld (3). Moreover, these two types of achievement highlight one of the effects of seriality, which Maeder and Wentz note in playful social media postings

(130-131). Here, seriality also has a dual valence, so that it refers to the idea of one item following another, in serial fashion, as well as the notion of being imprinted with a serial number. In the latter regard, seriality refers to a particular sameness, of the sort afforded by a recipe on a card. This is reflected right away in the notion that the *pouding au chômeur* is not quite right even as it is necessarily a playful recipe, with a playful name, and is made in the spirit of making do in rough times. On its face, dessert is not a necessity, but it is a kind of achievement that says things are not so bad, even in the face of depression or pandemic. Thus, I was absolutely serious in offering that I was collecting recipes to experiment with and to maintain and sometimes to establish as connection to "home."

Intriguingly, there is a further contradiction in the notion that a recipe derived from things on hand needs reifying and fixing. My mother's recipe for *pouding au chômeur* – my Mémé had two apple trees and a pear tree and pears can be a lovely substitute – was not "authentic," at least according to some traditions as equally valid as my own. That is a nice way of saying I broke a rule, even as others were denouncing actual, legally enforced rules, such as lockdowns, social distancing, mask mandates, and vaccine requirements. Nothing highlights this more than the eponymous *pets de soeurs*. The very name reflects a longstanding French Canadian linguistic playfulness with the church. At the same time, *pets de soeurs* are made from scraps of pie pastry, butter, brown sugar, and things on hand. Yet even as this has an "official" or "authentic" method of making them, which again I managed to transgress, despite the fact that this was at least a four-generation method and other Franco-Ontarians noted a similar family history. One must imagine that a treat made from random scraps – items that some would throw away – and therefore has no recipe still has a set of indexical-symbolic signs attached to it and indeed is one itself (Tambiah, 128-130). It evokes a set of nostalgic memories that render each instance unique and yet similar. However, one friend, a Québecois now living in Boston, tweeted back a picture of a box of store-bought, ready made "fudge swirls" with an agreement that *pets de soeurs* are among his favorite.[7]

The mass production vs the home made, with both posted to the internet, begs a consideration of Marshall McLuhan's axiom, the medium is the message. For McLuhan, a medium is any extension and the message is the "change of scale, pace,

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[7] Although space does not permit, it would be interesting to consider (at least) a pair of implications regarding the myth of French Canadians as a homogeneous lot in terms Québec as metonymic for francophone and the ways commodification informs that representation and its concomitant perception. Indeed, neither of us is québecois(e).

and pattern that it introduces *into human affairs* (emphasis added)" (24). It is this last that is frequently overlooked even as the axiom is misunderstood. Following from McLuhan, if you want to understand a medium, look at the change, not the content. Indeed, the content of any medium is another medium. Here, the message is the change of pace, whether it is the lack of time to make the pie, the scale and pace of industry to the make the dessert, or the change of scale, pace and pattern wrought be social media, as well as the change to scale pace and pattern wrought by the pandemic. The practice of "doing it for the gram" offers a terrific example that demonstrates McLuhan's viewpoint. The medium shapes and conditions the experience of the content, but it also has a material consequence in terms of "our work, our leisure, our cities" (24). Rather than labour saving, the devices and media create work and new roles for us. Notably, the "work" of nostalgia takes the material form of the food and the social form of sharing with family and friends. These material consequences shape not only the production, but also the distribution and consumption to foster connections in a system – the internet – that works in and through its disconnectedness. At some point the "content" is not important; instead, the likes and engagements become the content. Playful pandemic posts, however, are not just about collecting likes even as the medium does become the message, for the content is the change of scale, pace, and pattern of connectedness to home, happier times, and people with whom to empathize, to share and to play.

Let's Play Again: Conclusions

Ultimately, our conclusions could only be written at the very close of the project, as the hope of vaccine effectiveness and distribution faded into a second holiday season in lockdown and the prospect of living with COVID-19 became yet another risk of everyday life. As we reflect on the shared experience of cooking and baking our way through a pandemic, one thing stands out. The change of so-called Web 2.0, or interactive online social media, was supposed to be the ability of individual content users to become producers. Instead, what we have witnessed has been simply a shift in the deployment of corporate media rather than the prophesied restructuring and democratizing. However, readers still make texts – and beans and pies – and use things in idiosyncratic ways, sometimes with unexpected consequences (McLuhan 23-24). Even as the Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen reveals the intentions of social media conglomerates to foster divisiveness, our own anecdotal experience, with and among a cohort of Canadian ex-pats

stranded in the U.S.A., reveals the powerful potential of play to facilitate positive social experiences (Fisher 1322).

At a time when headlines proclaim "*Fortnite* to alt-right" (Condis) as an inevitable outcome of online play, this becomes a particularly important reminder of the ongoing importance of everyday acts and rituals. This should not be as surprising as it is given the hopefulness underlying de Certeau's original offering of the methods and "tactics" – including cooking – that inspire the current reflection (40). In connecting play and tactics as a means of instantiating control in moments when the individual might feel as though control has been lost or taken away, Rolf Nohr explains that the "immanent logic of the society of control and its decentralized and meandering formations allow for realizing a potential to overcome dominant forms of power" (215). Indeed, Nohr highlights the power of idiosyncratic forms of play to become "tactical actions," and in particular those that re-orient forms of work and labour into moments that appropriate the means of production.

Likewise, Priscilla Ferguson notes the operation of "opportunitistic tactics" like "poaching" and "making do" as a means of empowerment in and through the production of food, particularly in resisting the prescriptive rules of recipes, rules, and mass production (142). It is in these regards that playful cooking also reveals the productive dimensions of appropriation (i.e., poaching) and transculturation (i.e., making do) by teasing the limits of seriality. Since these operate at the levels of tactics, they always depend, as Nohr points out, on time and our experience of it. Yet, as Ferguson notes, nostalgia always depends not on time, but on space, which has "its own hierarchy, which responds to the question implicit in all of these locations in space: *whose* home, *which* peasants, *what* restaurant, *which* region, and so on" (23).

As our title and the names – *pets de soeurs* and *pouding (au) chômeur* – reveal, playfulness, both textual and otherwise, has a deeply rooted place in French Canadian culture at the most quotidian of levels. This has been true even in the face of the diaspora, the depression and two world wars; in other words, over time. Far from simple nostalgia, our experience of playfully cooking through the COVID-19 pandemic represents an opportunity to be part of and contribute to an ongoing conversation with and through food, one that spans multiple generations. Where Ferguson notes the production of cookbooks and pamphlets as a means of resisting the nostalgia produced by distance, the internet and social media offer the latest medium for sharing the tactics of making do. Our making do also extends to the

practice of sharing, but this should not be surprising, either, for as Nohr also notes, playful tactics are always already their own commentary (199-200). In this case, the commentary reflects our resistance of the ongoing commodification of food-based nostalgia (Duruz 23) and the insincerity of the "like" button (Faucher).

Yet, there is a temptation – one which we should resist as strongly as we resist the divisiveness the corporate masters of social media seek to exploit – towards deterministic approaches that echo the inevitability of "doom scrolling." What has been unstated, then, is the productive potential of nostalgia. Long derided as inauthentic, mass-produced, formulaic, and worse, nostalgia is at its core an indexical sign, pointing to and giving measure of memories. In the social media age, memory has become the victim of the "auto-amputation" McLuhan details as the cost of my automated extension of the self (43). Nostalgia, then, offers a counter, as it were, to the algorithmic version of memory, yet another kind of prescriptive seriality, and inspires the sorts of memories we hope to pass on to our children. We want them to remember that we did more than just "make do." Our lives, and hopefully this paper, are better for it.

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The New Sliding Glass Door

CHRISTOPHER TADROS

February 2020 was a month of firsts: the beginning of my second semester as a first-year college student, my first time exploring the concept of a fraternity at an American university, my first time competing in a ballroom dance competition, and the first time I was able to envision what my identity would be in college. I was riding all sorts of highs, feeling ready to take the rest of the semester full steam ahead. I left for a spring break trip on the first weekend of March with everything normal and returned to a world where everything had changed. Somehow in a week, everything I had worked my way up to was put on pause. We did not fret; we only thought we were getting an extra two weeks of spring break. I returned to my dorm room to pack enough winter clothes for these two weeks as the clothes I had brought to Costa Rica would not have sufficed, and I left the vast majority of my belongings at college. My dance partner and I told each other we would be sure to practice on our own so that we could stay at our best for our national competitions the first weekend after these two weeks off. However, we were later told that there would be no nationals and that we would not return to the classes we had begun. Instead, we had to return to our dorm rooms, pack our things, and leave campus indefinitely. Distraught, we entered the second half of March with little to no knowledge of what to do.

As the semester lulled on, my only source of comfort in the uncertainty of the pandemic was my new-found free time to experiment with all-new recipes. Before I moved into a dorm room, cooking was my life. I started at five years old in the kitchen with my mom making French toast and grew my skills and passion for cuisine as time went on. I would binge-watch hours and hours of chefs Gordon Ramsay and Anthony Bourdain, as well as Food Network's *Chopped*. Unfortunately, I only had time to cook relatively quick meals as an over-involved high school student. During the pandemic, however, I told myself I would embark on a journey to master what I had thought was an unreachable dish: bœuf à la Bourguignonne, beef bourguignon. I had watched Julia Child's *The French Chef* episode countless times and essentially had the recipe memorized, but the thought of creating something so delicate, with so much passion, and with such an intensive

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procedure, was almost unattainable. Rightfully so, as my first time attempting the dish resulted in nothing more than some soupy beef. As I continued to put far more effort into this dish than my schoolwork, the final result turned into something that surpassed any of my family's expectations. Letting them see my progress and sharing the final result together as a celebration was far more rewarding than the dish itself (but do not get me wrong, the dish was impeccable).

I was especially glad that by the time I felt that I had mastered the dish, it was warm enough for us to eat outside fully together, as my father was not able to partake in any of the trials and errors the rest of my family had seen me through. While so many people were furloughed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with an uncertain financial future, we were fortunate enough not to experience this. The expenses, however, were the new sliding glass door in the basement we installed so my father would not have to enter the main area of the house when he came home, or the Airbnb we rented when he felt it was not safe to even return home, or the countless bottles of face cream he used to relieve the mask and goggle imprints left around and under his eyes. For months, my father, a cardiologist, lived life separate from the rest of us. What many people were not aware of, is just how many heart attacks were caused or exacerbated by COVID-19. For a period of time, there were not enough tests to know if a patient who was coming in with a heart attack was COVID-19 positive or not. Every time I made food for us, I would leave his plate at the bottom of the basement stairs, and we would video call one another while we ate. Some days, he would not be home for dinner, and I would pack some extras for him later that evening, and other days I found the fridge full of leftovers that he could not come home to enjoy. It was heartbreaking, and sometimes infuriating, to see what he sacrificed for us and for the community when at times it seemed as if the community had no intention of changing their habits to make his life easier.

It is important to acknowledge the privilege I had to be able to dive so deeply into cuisine and culture and to not have had to worry about the expenses of doing so. As parents that had immigrated from Egypt to offer their children, me and my siblings, better opportunities than they themselves had experienced, my parents established a place for us to be able to explore. It is this exploration, perhaps, that primed me to deal with the uncertainty of my father in the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was the hope that by the time I could make an unforgettable beef bourguignon, that we would be able to enjoy it together. Thus, the feeling of finally being able to bring chairs outside spaced far enough apart that we were still safe,

but close enough where we could hear and speak to each other, was one of the most joyful experiences I have had. I know I will never fully understand the scope of my father's sacrifice, but it is my hope that the meal we shared together after four long months expressed my gratitude to him in ways that I would not be able to do verbally. It is because of him that I am where I am today, and he is who I hope to emulate in the future.

How the Pandemic Redefined Comfort Food: American Individualism, Culinary Relativism, and Shifting Moralities

LUCY M. LONG

Early in the arrival of COVID-19 in the United States in 2020, American popular media began promoting dishes and meals described as comfort food as a way to deal with the anxieties, difficulties, and inconveniences caused by the pandemic. Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary in 1997 as "food that comforts or affords solace," comfort food seems like a logical thing for people to turn to in a time of crisis (Locher). Observations of news media and social media as well as ethnographic research suggest that the idea resonated with the American public (Cresswell; Long "Finding Comfort;" Laskey).

The concept, however, is more complicated than simply food that brings comfort. Its original vernacular use in the 1950s and 60s reflects a U.S. American morality around food that ties the consumption of foods considered "unhealthy" or "fattening" to a lack of character, self-discipline, or self-esteem (Jones and Long). Feelings of loneliness, hurt, or depression could be assuaged by such foods, so experiencing those feelings became justification for consuming "comfort foods" without moral indictment (Counihan "Food Rules;" Locher; Ong et al.; Romm; Wagner et al.). At least that is what individuals could tell themselves and others, so that comfort food emerged as a rhetorical strategy for eating these foods without guilt or shame. The phrase was adopted by academics

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studying nutrition and health issues, and the food industry coopted it as a marketing category for certain foods laden with sugars, fats, oils, carbohydrates, and generally considered less than nutritious but tasty. These foods were oftentimes presented as snack foods or as "down home" all-American cooking (Long "Comfort Food in Culinary Tourism"). Products advertised as "comfort foods" are now mass-produced and commercially available throughout the United States, and marketing even identifies some restaurants as belonging to that genre of food (Jones and Long; Wagner et al.).

As the pandemic raged through 2021, comfort food continued to hold a prominent place in popular media as well as in the food industry. I propose, though, that the general public has unintentionally redefined the concept, and that this redefinition challenges the assumptions underlying comfort food as a genre within U.S. American food culture that reflects a shift in the morality attached to food and eating. The genre has been expanded to that of "foods that comfort" without judgment of the eater's moral character, and mass media has played a central role in this process.

I explore that shift in this paper, arguing that its implications go beyond simply an expansion of which items are considered within the category. This new conceptualization incorporates both the fundamental U.S American ideal of individualism and the reality of diversity within the nation, merging those ideas into a widespread culinary relativism that accepts the validity of all tastes and personal experiences. In doing so, it challenges the authority of the food industry to define the meanings food holds for us and represents an on-going re-negotiation of who gets to say what constitutes good food.

The Concept of Comfort Food

Food has long been seen in the US as representing the moral character of the individuals consuming it. Historian Jennifer Wallach traces attitudes to multiple sources for this perspective but sees the Puritans as primarily responsible for this belief system: "The custom of eating simply was fundamental to many Puritans' sense of who they were…Their most important source of sustenance…was spiritual and not temporal" (27). This translated into "simple dishes" valued for their practical functions and a suspicion of anyone who found sensual pleasure in food.

Such attitudes laid a foundation for a U.S. American food ethos that has carried over into contemporary mainstream society. For example, anthropologist Carole Counihan identified a system of morality at play among college students in the 1980s that evaluated different foods as "good" or "bad" according to the nutritional content and function of those items. Obesity was then interpreted as the result of consuming bad foods, and a reflection of the individual's character:

> Because food means comfort and love for students, splurging on sweets or other special foods is sanctioned as a crutch for dealing with emotional distress: grief, depression, anger. Students know eating certain foods makes them feel better; so they allow the emotionally therapeutic value of the food to override the possible nutritional drawbacks of eating too much or eating the wrong things. (59)

That these values have become normalized is evident in how common it is to speak offhandedly of being "bad" by consuming foods considered unnecessary for our physical nourishment. Counihan also pointed out that this system is gendered: "morality demands self-control for women but allows indulgence to men" (4), and scholarship of foodway cultures associated with non-mainstream identities suggests different world views and moralities. One of my observations is that these other voices are becoming heard during the pandemic.

Emergence of the Concept of Comfort Food

The phrase "comfort food" seems to have first been used in print in a 1966 newspaper column by psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers who claimed it was being used by patients to explain their weight issues. Food writers in the popular media popularized it further. In 1977, a food critic for the *Washington Post* described an iconic dish (shrimp and grits) and its entire regional cuisine (the South) as comfort food, implying that it tasted good but was unhealthy (Richman). Later, in 2013, she corroborated the idea that the concept of comfort food existed within the general public, and she and others had simply named it (Richman).

The name was then picked up by the food industry, which used it for marketing, framing comfort foods as a specific genre to be judged according to how well they comforted rather than by their nutritional value. The result was that "bad" ingredients, such as large amounts of fats, sugars, salt, and carbohydrates, were expected in these foods and not taken into account in assessments of them. Comfort food is now an established genre in the US for cookbooks, recipes,

restaurants, and retailers, and the concept serves as a rhetorical strategy by which eaters justify – to themselves as well as to others – the consumption of "bad" foods. It is also now being used globally for some international foods to carry the characteristics of the genre. Whether it also carries the attached morality is unclear but would not be unsurprising given the spread of U.S. American cultural forms and mores.

Scholarship on Comfort Food

While the food industry and food media seemed to be aware of comfort food by the 1980s and 90s, it has received little attention from scholars. In the early 2000s, professionals in health and nutrition fields began looking at it to understand "unhealthy" eating, and medical sociologist, Julie Locher, developed a widely used definition: "Comfort food may be best thought of as any food consumed by individuals, often during periods of stress, that evokes positive emotions and is associated with significant social relationships" (442). Locher and her colleagues went on to identify patterns in the use of comfort foods. They oftentimes were dishes familiar to the eater, consumed when the individual was "feeling down" and was alone. They provided comfort by fulfilling four emotional needs: nostalgia, convenience, physical comfort, and indulgence (279). Continued research identified an additional need – that of belonging (Troisi and Gabriel). Consuming foods that reminded one of social connections could then comfort, as could eating with other people. Other researchers questioned whether consuming these foods actually could bring any significant benefits, particularly when their consumption actually brought further discomfort or feelings of shame.[1]

   Social science scholarship on comfort food was concerned primarily with finding solutions to "poor" eating behaviors, and few scholars approached it as a cultural phenomenon. A recent volume explored it as a social construction, offering ethnographic accounts of its symbolic meanings and material uses in a range of food cultures in the U.S. and internationally (Jones and Long). This scholarship on comfort food seems not to have trickled down into popular culture. Media stories about comfort food during the pandemic only rarely referenced it. This lack suggests that the concept continues to be an emic genre rather than an

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[1] Nutritionists developed a similar concept, "emotional eating," but the term does not acknowledge the underlying morality and ensuing guilt associated with comfort food.

analytical one imposed by scholars or health professionals. Also, these appearances of the genre initially perpetuated the morality attached to the genre, but some stories and social media posts challenged those judgments. Some official media similarly followed suit, allowing for what seemed to become a dialogic conversation about the nature of this genre.

Comfort Food in Media and Social Media: Fulfilling Needs. Comfort food began showing up in news media and social media soon after the pandemic was officially announced in the United States in early March of 2020. These posts mentioned all five of the needs identified by scholars (convenience, nostalgia, indulgence, physical comfort, belonging) but also suggested others, such as distraction or escape. The needs are not exclusive and oftentimes overlap. The phrase "comfort food" was frequently used but, in some instances, was implied through phrases such as "stress-eating," "comforting foods," and "dishes that give comfort." The general pattern was to point to the existence of specific needs as justification for consuming these foods, which in turn affirms the existence of a morality attached to the genre.

Fulfilling the Need for Convenience. One of the first stories in an official news outlet to recognize the prevalence of comfort food during the pandemic was on April 7, 2020, titled "'I Just Need the Comfort': Processed Foods Make a Pandemic Comeback" (Cresswell). The author described how sales for numerous companies had skyrocketed along with the pandemic and explained this trend due to "a combination of fear and practicality." People wanted foods with long shelf lives in case of shortages, lock-downs, or difficulties around shopping. They also wanted foods that could be prepared quickly and easily, perhaps even by children, since families were suddenly at home all day, but work and school continued. She also points out less practical reasons: "For others, the food purchases are purely an emotional reaction. Consumers are reaching for foods that trigger a comforting childhood memory or are simply their go-to snack when they need to relieve stress."

The 508 comments left on the *NYT*'s website suggest that this recognition of the turn to convenience foods for comfort struck a chord, both positively and negatively. Some readers appreciated the affirmation of their own choices, but others worried that this behavior would have a negative impact on body weight or health, perpetuating the implicit assumption that foods eaten for comfort rather than for nutritional or biological needs were unhealthy. As one reader pleaded: "Please, people, you will only hurt yourself by eating these foods with very little

nutrition, minerals and vitamins and loaded with preservatives and God Knows what other chemicals!" (April 8, 2020, Ellijay, GA)

Other readers had a sense of humor about their own "lapses." One commenter wrote, "When I realized I could only order one package of Oreo Double Stuffs, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry" (April 8, 2020, Susan A., Ventura, CA). And another stated, "Doritos and I have reunited. It's a toxic relationship. This week I have put more pounds on my body than miles on my car" (April 7, 2020. Carolina, Indianapolis, IN).

The article focused on "convenience foods" for comfort (Locher; Locher, et al). Not all of these are "unhealthy" in terms of nutritional content, but the category reflects the history of the industrial food system in the United States and the ways in which it has inserted highly processed foods dependent on modern technology into our daily eating habits. Numerous scholars, health professionals, and activists warn of the harms of these foods, but the pandemic justified consuming them anyway.

Fulfilling the Need for Nostalgia. The April 2020 article brought up another need – nostalgia – reflecting the reality that many U.S. Americans grew up with processed foods rather than the idealized homemade foods of stay-at-home mothers and grandmothers. One reader's comment confirms that point and even suggests that these highly processed products represent "civilization," a concept they find comforting: "What really sees us through is salt, fat, sugar and carbs. They sustain, energize and inspire us. As long as they are available we know we are tethered to civilization and the familiar. For me, Chef Boyardee Ravioli has been by my side from childhood days…to my 70th birthday next week and beyond" (April 8, 2020, Reuven, Long Island, NY). Other media stories similarly emphasized the nostalgic aspect of comfort food but continue the theme of these foods being unhealthy. One offers "updated" versions, claiming, "Comfort is more than just the flavors. It's the memories." It then suggests that the original recipes be saved for holidays, although readers should still limit the amounts they eat: "Sometimes, comfort is handled in the first bite…You don't really need to eat the entire tray to remember how you felt when your mom served it to you" (*Southern Living*, May 24, 2021).

Fulfilling the Need for Indulgence. A third need identified by Locher – indulgence – is addressed in numerous articles and postings. As more than one social media poster pointed out, the pandemic has forced us to confront our mortality. One response to that knowledge is to indulge while we can. An April

2021 article, for example, states bluntly, "Sometimes, you just want to indulge in a classic comfort food dish, and we're here to let you know there is nothing wrong with that" (Madonado). The author then offers "100+ Best-Ever Comfort Food Recipes" that "you can easily whip up in your kitchen….and they're good for you, too." Most of the dishes are usually heavy on carbohydrates, butter or other fats, dairy, salt, and sugar, but these alternative "healthier" recipes encourage readers to "indulge" without concern for their potential physical impact.

Fulfilling the Need for Physical Comfort. Physical comfort was the fourth need identified by Locher who observed that comfort food dishes are oftentimes associated with chilly weather that would encourage people to seek warmth and stay inside. The fact that the pandemic hit the United States in the winter months meant that, for many U.S. Americans, cold weather was also an excuse to seek comfort foods. An example in 2020, "A January Menu That Comforts and Restores," states, "We're all craving comfort, especially this winter, and nothing soothes like a warm bowl of soup, whether as a starter or as a meal" (Tanis).

The cold weather also meant that many U.S. Americans wanted to spend hours in the kitchen, letting the warmth of the oven and aromas of dishes baking fill the house. This partly motivated the surge in baking in the United States early in the pandemic that then resulted in shortages of flour and yeast.[2] An article titled, "Stress Baking More Than Usual? Confined to their homes, U.S. Americans are kneading dough," points to physical comfort but also the need to get our minds off of the pandemic: "But for those who can still get the ingredients, baking provides a combination of distraction, comfort and especially with bread recipes, which can take days to complete – something to look forward to" (Marvar). Numerous publications offered recipes and instructions for joining the baking trend, expanding it beyond bread to include cakes, cookies: "What's more comforting than stirring together a bowl of brown, beige and white ingredients, sliding it into the oven and watching as it transforms into something golden and spectacular?" (Laskey).

A later article refers not to the weather but to the current political state of affairs along with the pandemic, "Between pandemic fears and election stress, there are many reasons to crave comfort food, the edible equivalent of a weighted blanket. These 82 dishes won't cure anything, but they might give you a little peace of mind" (*New York Times,* Nov. 2, 2021). The physical comforts offered

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[2] The author explores the phenomenon in another article (Long and Vaughan, 2022).

by these foods can then translate into less tangible comforts.

Fulfilling the Need for Belonging. Belonging was identified by later researchers as an additional need fulfilled by comfort food (Troisi). The shutdowns due to the pandemic, as well as the recommended precautions, meant that many individuals were physically isolated. Even though virtual socializing emerged as an alternative, the pandemic was a time of loneliness for large portions of U.S. American society. Interestingly, media did not emphasize this loneliness as a potential justification for comfort food. Instead, it featured the idea of the activities around food as offering a sense of connection that could fulfill the need for belonging. One article stated:

> Almost overnight, Americans have had to rethink one of the most elemental parts of their daily lives: food...eating is a cultural ritual that is also a necessity. Mealtimes arrive three times a day. How do you feed yourself and your family when restaurants are shuttered and store shelves emptying? And how do you take care of a community in crisis when caregiving meals...are off limits? (Severson and Moskin)

Similarly, a chef, Massimo Bottura, describes how he started a show, *Kitchen Quarantine*, with his family that offered a sense of belonging to himself and others. He stated, "Despite the loneliness and being isolated in our homes, we can connect and talk to people all over the world….This is something very special."

Media stories and comments referencing the need to belong or its corollary, the need to assuage loneliness, frequently bypassed the morality implicitly attached to comfort food. Whereas some of the earlier scholarship on the subject pointed out that consuming these foods actually made people less likely to be sociable or to be invited into social relationships (Troisi), the pandemic forced an isolation that was imposed and not due to any personal failings of individuals. This external factor perhaps relieved people of the guilt they might otherwise have felt for not having social networks.[3]

Challenging the Morality Attached to Comfort Food

Most of these food media articles and responses echo the morality implicit in the genre of "comfort food," presenting it as "bad." They emphasized that the

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[3] This lack of guilt is perhaps due to the liminal quality of the pandemic in which the rules for healthy eating seem to be suspended (Shen, et al, 2020). This also helps explain the turn to comfort food since the genre itself can reflect liminality (Long 2017).

ingredients and dishes within that genre tend to be full of carbs, salt, sugar, or other qualities believed to be detrimental to eaters' health. Some of the articles suggest alternative ingredients or cooking styles felt to be healthier, while others point out that the pandemic justifies consuming comfort dishes in their classic renditions.

Comments from readers, postings on social media, and even some of the official media articles oftentimes chimed in with accounts of similar experiences and feelings, offering recipes and practical advice. Some comments, however, as well as media stories, began challenging the morality attached to comfort foods, doing so by referencing two fundamental characteristics of American society: individualism and diversity. Although these seem contradictory, they incorporate both the ideals and the realities of being U.S. American. They also reflect other current food trends expanding the American palate, namely, that of culinary relativism.

Individualism in American Culture. One of the themes in comments on social media and food media was that individuals could have their own definitions of comfort food. This definition could be a conscious expression of values and tastes as well as a reflection of personal histories that shaped which foods were comforting to them. For example, one reader in response to the article on convenience food stated emphatically that the foods she chooses for "stress eating" differ from the ones suggested in the article. That choice, furthermore, reflects her personal history. She writes, "I'm doing all I can to improve my immune system. That means eating healthy…I'm stress eating like everyone else but that means fruit and vegetables and a very good glass of wine now and then" (April 8, 2020, Bernice K., NYC).

An article on baking acknowledged the individuality of the readers in its title: "21 Quarantine Baking Recipes for Every Skill Level," specifying: "Whether you're a beginner or an experienced baker, you'll find ideas to help pass the time with delicious results...For some, baking is a regular affair, while, for others, it's a big-deal project...Feel free to jump between categories as ambition and taste dictate" (Laskey). This emphasis on the reader being able to assert their own interpretation of the comfort food genre can be interpreted as reflecting an ethos of individualism, the belief that "the ultimate source of action, meaning, and responsibility is the individual rather than the group" (Fischer 364). This individualism is an essential part of the American character and a driving force in the ways in which history has unfolded and society has developed. In theory,

individuals are expected to make their own choices about their lives and then take responsibility for the outcomes.

Scholars have problematized the concept, pointing out that there are different kinds of individualism and multiple ways of asserting it (Grabb et al.), but it is evident in much of American popular culture, including food (Counihan 1992). Restaurants, for example, are expected to cater to individual preferences, allowing "add-ons" or deletions of ingredients according to taste, religion, ethical values, or health concerns.[4]

Diversity in American Society and Food Culture. This individualism in defining what can be considered comfort foods may have existed below the surface but it emerged publicly during the pandemic. Everyone had their own memories attached to food, and those memories were treated as valid interpretations of their personal comfort foods. This individualism, ironically, led to an expanding of what could be considered comfort food, and that expansion represented a more accurate portrayal of the diversity of American society than offered previously. For example, one response in the comments to the *New York Times* article on convenience foods, points out that the assumed norm of comfort foods is not accurate for everyone. Identifying themselves as based in Mexico, the writer points to class, ethnicity and even ethos as the basis for a different consideration of what constitutes the genre:

> I grew up on a poor working class diet, meaning meat and potatoes and veg. Rarely desert (birthdays and holidays) and never processed foods (they were more expensive in the 50s and 60s). I raised my daughter on a basic counterculture/hippie diet, sometimes even grinding my own wheat. None of what you listed is comfort food for me. (*New York Times,* April 8, 2020.)

Food media also began recognizing this diversity, acknowledging that U.S. Americans come from many places and can therefore have diverse memories of childhood. Nostalgia can be different for each of us. The result was a celebration and exploration of diverse ethnic heritages as the basis for a broader variety of dishes considered comfort food. Typical of this celebration was a December 2020 article, titled "What Comfort Food Looks Like to People Around the world: Six people who turned their love for food into careers tell us about the flavors that nourish their souls" (Parogni). The article then gives short vignettes of 6 dishes,

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[4] The success of Burger King's slogan "Have it Your Way" that has been popular since 1974 suggests that individualism is alive and well.

each of which represented childhood memories: *pandan* cake (London's Chinatown), *mollete* (Mexico City), plantain (Ghana), *katsu sando* (Japan), wild blueberries (Minnesota), and *aa'atar manousheh* (Lebanon).

These dishes all represent non-white, non-European culinary cultures, affirming the unspoken bias of comfort food as a mainstream American construction. Even the wild blueberries, which could be shared with numerous residents of the United States is given a specific ethnic identity, that of the indigenous Dakota nation. Interestingly, this diversity is presented here as global rather than national, but there was a similar expanding throughout the pandemic in other food media of the genre to include foods representing diverse backgrounds. An article in May of 2020 suggested an Italian dish as a comfort food. It reads, "Gone global? With only three simple ingredients, *cacio e pepe* is a rich pasta dish that's hard not to love. And when you do get that elusive texture, it becomes the ideal comfort food" (Monaco).

These presentations of comfort foods representing diverse identities and experiences for some individuals may reflect the "foodie" trend in contemporary U.S. American food culture. Corresponding to other social trends of identifying oneself by one's interests, foodies were seen as creating "distinction" and social status through their all-consuming obsession with food (Johnston and Baumann). This obsession, oftentimes criticized as elitist, included being adventurous in one's eating experiences. Tasting new foods was applauded, in contrast to a long-standing neophobia and xenophobia that had characterized mainstream American food culture. Exposure to these other approaches to food, however, has also raised questions around the healthfulness to society, the environment, and to individuals, of that culture. The pandemic has created an occasion for trying out "alternative" foodways practices, values, and beliefs.

Comfort Food and Culinary Relativism

This widespread acknowledgment – and celebration – of diversity in comfort foods means more than a trendy exploration of new frontiers of tastes and food experiences. This acceptance of different food cultures and their various belief systems about food and eating can be interpreted as the emergence of what I refer to as "culinary relativism," borrowing from the anthropological concept of cultural relativism in which it is argued that a culture should be evaluated on its

own terms and that no cultures can be objectively judged as better or worse than others (Boas).

Applied to food, relativism suggests that if we want to understand what, why, and how a group eats, we need to place their foodways practices, beliefs, and tastes within their particular history, natural environment, culture, and economic-political conditions. While practices may differ from our own, they do not reflect a culture of lesser moral quality or intelligence, even when they challenge our own perceptions of edibility or palatability. Similarly, each individual's food universe should be understood within their own history of experiences and identities. Differences in cookery skills or approaches to food exist, and they might not be to one's own liking or values, but the concept of culinary relativism offers a perspective for understanding what food means to individuals and specific groups, and how and why those meanings developed.

Comfort food from this perspective can therefore include any food or foodways practice that fulfills the needs identified as belonging to this genre. One of those needs is nostalgia, and if comfort foods are those dishes that satisfy nostalgia, then they would naturally reflect the diverse backgrounds of individuals today. That diversity represents the realities of contemporary (and past) American society in which citizens possess a variety of identities, including race, ethnicity, class, gender, region, religion, all of which then shape the personal histories of individuals. A multicultural society would by definition then allow for a variety of dishes to be considered comfort food. It would also challenge the authority to define this genre – an authority historically held by the upper and middle-class white, western European, Protestant based segment of society.

During the pandemic, this culinary relativism around comfort food was encouraged by digital technologies now widely available and accessible, enabling us to communicate with people all over the world. Social media as well as more official media outlets made us aware of what other people were cooking and eating. These outlets also showed us different ingredients and dishes being consumed for comfort, expanding the notion of what foods could fit into the genre of comfort food and affirming both the individualism and the relativism of the genre. My own observations suggest that the popularity of the concept of comfort food has spread across the globe, but it is unclear whether it carries an American food ethos and aesthetic. Further study on the continued spread of the genre would be useful in determining whether glocalized adaptations of comfort food are challenging the morality attached to it in the United States.

Expanding the Genre: From Comfort Food to Foods That Comfort

I argue here that comfort food has been redefined during the pandemic. No longer a genre carrying a specific cultural ethos and history, these foods are exactly what the name suggests: foods that comfort. Eating them brings some sort of solace, and that is publicly recognized as an important function especially needed during the pandemic, regardless of what their consumption might formerly have implied about the moral character of the eater. Everyone now can turn guilt-free to such dishes for comfort and emotional sustenance.

Two media stories illustrate this redefining of comfort food. The first is a review in the *New York Time*s of two companies offering *challah* (a Jewish bread) by mail. Observing that such companies are "bringing [it] into the mainstream," the reviewer describes the products offered by one entrepreneur, pointing out that they are from his childhood. He writes, "The boxes are inspired by the 'potluck of different cultures,' as Blanks puts it, that inform the cuisine in Israel, and especially by dishes that bring him comfort" (Goldfield).

The second story expands the concept of comfort food to encompass the relationships and social contexts that sharing food can evoke. In this case, it is not the food itself that comforts, but the pleasure that comes from preparing and consuming it. Referring to the famous chef, cookbook writer, and cooking teacher, Julia Child, Julie Cohen claims that numerous people turned to her for inspiration during the pandemic – and found comfort. The article's title suggests the broader approach to comfort food: "More than comfort Food: Julia Child has provided the comfort the pandemic-wracked world has craved." Cohen then asks why Child "is resonating so profoundly during the age of Covid?" She provides an answer to her own question, "Part of it is nostalgia, of course, and the simple fact that cooking in a home kitchen for one's own pod is one of the few epidemiologically correct joys available to us" Cohen then observes that this comfort comes from fulfilling the need to belong: "For Julia, creating and devouring a meal were acts of intense connection. That's what we want and what gives us pleasure."

This article is especially interesting given that Child emphasized French cooking and refined culinary training, both of which are usually outside the genre of comfort food. She even spoke dismissively of cooks who did not care about the intricacies of cooking technique and wanted to serve comfort food (Spitz). That

Child can now be drawn into that category shows a reworking and expansion of what constitutes it. No longer perceived as foods that need justification in order to be consumed, the genre includes any food that brings comfort in any way.

Concluding Thoughts

Comfort food is a socially constructed category that reflects the ethos and history of U.S. American food culture. The concept seems to have moved from an original emic genre being used by the general public to morally justify their eating behaviors to an etic one used by scholars to analyze those behaviors, then back again to an emic one now being redefined by a much more diverse national and perhaps global community.

The redefinition reflects other trends and concerns in contemporary U.S. American culture, most prominently, the individualism fundamental to that culture. It also reflects current realities of the nation as made up of individuals with diverse heritages, identities, personalities, values, and tastes. If each person can have their own comfort food, then the expectation of which dishes constitute the genre has to be broadened to include that multiplicity of individuals. Social media as well as formal, official food media outlets then began celebrating a much wider range of comfort foods.

On the one hand, this can be seen as representing an attitude of cosmopolitanism towards ones' eating habits that characterizes "foodie" trends, but it also reflects, I feel, an emerging culinary relativism that allows for all of those tastes to be considered meaningful and valid. The shift from an emic category to etic and then back to emic seems to extend beyond the expansion of American food culture to be inclusive of diverse culinary traditions. It also brings in diverse approaches to food itself and perhaps even to the idea of comfort. Food is recognized as having the power to transform individuals, situations, and even communities. Comfort, similarly, is being expanded beyond transitory and individualistic feelings, to a deeper sense of personal value and meaningfulness. Furthermore, there seems to be an awareness developing that comfort can be found in the range of activities around food, not only in the consumption of specific dishes or ingredients. Shopping for groceries, gardening, canning, baking, setting a table for a meal, the sharing of food, and any other event or practice around eating could be a meaningful source for comfort.

And finally, this redefinition reflects a shift in cultural authority. The genre itself seemed to come out of the vernacular culture of generic "people," specifically those who were struggling with body weight issues. It was borrowed – "appropriated" even – by the food industry, but also given a more analytical meaning by medical sociologists, nutritionists, and psychologists. During the pandemic, "the people," largely through social media platforms, but also in collaboration with "the experts" in food media, restaurant, and cookbook industries, have taken back the phrase and established it with a new definition – that of "foods that comfort." This genre is free from the moral associations of the earlier one and allows for individual interpretations, adaptations, and innovations of both food and comfort.

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Pandemic Comfort Food

MICHAEL A. JOHNSON

Conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a well-documented increase in consumption and interest in comfort food, along with a corresponding increase in digital sociality. As might be expected, the experience of physical isolation and loneliness caused by the pandemic has led many to experiment with Zoom dinner parties, meokbang watching, and various other digital forms of commensality. This essay suggests that the explosion of discourse around comfort food consumption, along with the rise in digital commensality, during the pandemic shed new light on the concept, revealing its embeddedness in neoliberal subjectivities. For one, the settling of anxiety as a universal affective baseline harks to affective regimes that already defined pre-pandemic neoliberal subjectivities, suggesting the importance of historicizing the concept of comfort food within cultural neoliberalism. For another, the global relevance of comfort food becomes apparent as people from around the world share their anxieties and coping strategies with one another on social platforms from YouTube to TikTok. Here as well, cultural neoliberalism emerges as a framework for understanding cycles of anxiety and comfort-seeking as a shared, if not universal, experience throughout the globe.

This essay opens with an analysis of current research on the correlation between pandemic conditions and increased comfort food consumption. By contrasting consumer research with public health studies on comfort food consumption during the pandemic, we glimpse the aporetic nature of neoliberal subjectivity, caught impossibly between the disciplinary biopolitical regimes of consumerism, on the one hand, and wellness, on the other. One thing these two bodies of research have in common is a certain reductiveness in their understanding of comfort food, limited to a neurochemical conception of comfort. How might one think about pandemic comfort food consumption in a way that takes these biopolitical and necropolitical regimes seriously as determining the shape of life under neoliberal conditions while also leaving room for thinking in excess of this determinism?

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This essay draws on Lauren Berlant's concepts of "exhausted practical sovereignty" and "lateral agency" as well as Paul Preciado's practice of gender hacking and biohacking for guidance. Next, the essay performs a close analysis of Beryl Shereshewsky's influential YouTube channel, a valuable archive of the present that was born out of, and shaped by, the pandemic. Shereshewsky's channel centers comfort food consumption, comfort viewing, and global cross-cultural dialogue as the basis for online community formation. If food is an aesthetic experience through which individuals and groups construct and perform their identities, relationships, values, and conceptions of the world, as food anthropologists and ethnographers understand it, then Shereshewsky's channel posits comfort food as a mobile concept and a universal particular in world spaces shaped by neoliberal globalization. Indeed, the forms of digital commensality that occur on Shereshewsky's channel testify to forms of "exhausted practical sovereignty" that subjects of global neoliberalism have recourse to as they build lives despite the multiple failures of states, employers, and institutions to care for them.

In what sense does this essay use the terms cultural neoliberalism? Julie Wilson's introductory volume, *Neoliberalism: Key Ideas in Media and Cultural Studies* offers a valuable definition of the term and synthesis of scholarship engaged critically with the concept over the past decade. In a general sense, neoliberalism is, "a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life. According to neoliberalism, government's charge is not the care and security of citizens, but rather the promotion of market competition" (1). The concept of cultural neoliberalism in this essay corresponds to what Wilson describes as the phenomenon's most recent phase: "[h]ere neoliberalism is not only a set of economic policies and political discourses, but also a deeply entrenched *sensibility* of who we are and can become and of what is possible to do, both individually and collectively. It is what Raymond Williams called 'a structure of feeling'" (25). Even before the pandemic, the current phase of neoliberalism has been characterized by widespread precarity where crisis becomes an ordinary feature of everyday life. For this reason, neoliberal affective regimes are frequently characterized by short cycles of anxiety and comfort-seeking alongside long cycles of anxiety and depression. Wilson cites a blog entry from the Institute for Precarious Consciousness describing the insidious omnipresence of anxiety within neoliberal structures of feeling: "Anxiety has spread to the whole social field. All forms of intensity, self-expression, emotional connection, immediacy, and

enjoyment are now laced with anxiety. It has become the linchpin of subordination" ("We Are All Very Anxious"). Finally, this essay maintains that there are valuable lessons to be derived by attending to strategies for survival and coping in a variety of global contexts where neoliberal structures of feeling condition the everyday. Indeed, when asked why his film *Parasite* had resonated so powerfully for audiences throughout the globe, the Korean director, Bong Joon-ho replied, "there is no borderline between countries now because we all live in the same country, it's called capitalism – I think that's the reason" (Bong).

Pandemic Comfort Food in Consumer and Wellness Research

The New York Times reported in April 2020 that large food businesses, which had seen steady declines in sales previously, have experienced dramatic increases in demand since the COVID-19 outbreak. The Campbell Soup Company saw sales of Campbell's soup rise by 59% while sales of its Prego pasta sauce and its Pepperidge Farm Goldfish crackers increased by 52% and 23% respectively. Along similar lines, Kraft Heinz reported to its investors in early April 2020 that factories were working three shifts to meet suddenly increased demand for products like its Oscar Mayer cold cuts, Kraft cheese, and macaroni and cheese. Conagra Brands, which produces Slim Jim jerky snacks and Chef Boyardee pastas, reported a fifty percent increase in shipments to retailers and in-store sales in March 2020 (Creswell).

Companies like Farm Rich, responsible for such products as Disney Frozen II Mac & Cheese Bites and Star Wars Mandalorian Cheesy Potato Tots, began conducting consumer research as early as August 2020 to examine the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on Americans' eating habits. In conjunction with OnePoll, Farm Rich conducted a poll of two thousand respondents and found that two in three of its respondents reported eating more comfort food during the pandemic, citing pizza (55%), hamburgers (48%), ice cream (46%), French fries (45%), and other American "childhood food favorites" in particular (FarmRich.com). According to a longitudinal comparison (2004 – present) of key food search terms and searches for "comfort food" via Google Trends, comfort food related searches attained an all-time high in October 2020, a 35% increase from October 2019 and a 74% increase from October 2004.

If consumer researchers were the first to publish results showing a correlation between COVID-19 and changes in the eating habits of people in the developed world, academic researchers have been quick to catch up.

An Australian study published in June 2021 focuses on the perceived impact of COVID-19 on comfort food consumption over time, for example, the authors conclude that reported increase in consumption of comfort foods correlates to emotional distress generated by the pandemic (Salazar-Fernández et al.). Along similar lines, a Danish-Chinese study published in April 2021 focuses on COVID-19 and digital commensality, asking how reported increases in "out-of-control" eating during the pandemic might correlate to reported increases in use of digital technology for social purposes under the same conditions. The authors write:

> A recent survey during the first wave of the pandemic around April 2020 found that social activities had decreased between 46.7 and 58%, and overall life satisfaction had decreased by 30.5% (Ammar et al., 2020b). Eating behavior and physical activity levels were also adversely affected, with a reported decrease in total weekly activity minutes by 33%, higher reported meal frequency, snacking, "out-of-control" eating, and more unhealthy food choices (Ammar et al., 2020a). Somewhat expected, the number of individuals who used digital technology for social purposes had increased by 24.8% (Ammar et al., 2020b). Eating is, in large part, a social affair (cf. Herman, 2017), therefore, it seems natural to assume that a non-trivial share of newly-digitized social interaction involved food. (Andersen et al.)

The above examples of research on comfort food eating during the pandemic must be situated within the wider material and social context that produced them. On the surface, the contrast between these instantiations of pandemic-response knowledge production could not be more striking. If consumer research, we can presume, has emboldened large food producers like Kraft Heinz to increase production and invest in further development of nostalgic-but-addictive comfort food products to meet newly rising demand, public health research frames "comfort food consumption over time" as a "health-risk behavior" (Salazar-Fernández et al.). Research produced in this vein frames comfort food as a "coping mechanism," whose initial efficacy winds up devolving over time into a form of "disordered eating." Indeed, their conclusion calls for additional research into healthier ways to mitigate stress during a crisis: "[f]uture interventions should address comfort food consumption by focusing on handling emotional distress during a crisis." On its horizon of expectation is a public engaged in healthier coping mechanisms and risk reduction where eating habits are concerned.

While these two research products appear as though they couldn't be further apart – one caught up in the *teloi* of consumerism, indifferent to comfort foods' negative health effects, and the other caught up in the *teloi* of public health discourse – they both frame comfort food and the pandemic in surprisingly similar ways. To begin with, they rely on an equally decontextualized understanding of comfort food. The consumer study cited above measures consumption of specific food items such as pizza, hamburgers, ice cream, French fries, mac and cheese, and so on, while comfort foods in the above-cited nutrition study "refer to foods that are […] highly processed and rich in saturated fat, sugar, or sodium" (Salazar-Fernández et al.). Comfort foods in these studies are construed reductively as substances that provide comfort due to biochemical properties rather than their culturally embedded meanings.

Another blind spot at work in both the consumer and public health studies cited above is a reductive, and decontextualized, understanding of COVID-19. Consumer research tends to treat COVID-19 in terms of an external event with bearing on the consumer market; conceived in these terms, COVID-19 is on par with such external events as the holiday season, a newly signed trade agreement, or the arrival of a new "game-changing" technology. Its value as a data point resides in the degree of predictability and profitability of its effects on the consumer market. Public health studies are only slightly more nuanced in their understanding of COVID-19. Salazar-Fernández et al. measures the perceived negative impact of COVID-19 along three axes: economic impact, effect on interpersonal relationships with family and friends, and effect on own and friends' health. However, the conclusion of the study frames COVID-19 as a "stressor" among others, equated with any number of stressful life events, from divorce and the loss of a loved one to a career change. The conclusion takes as a given that there will be other stressors on the horizon and offers the reassuring conclusion that indulgence in comfort food is an effective short-term coping mechanism in response to these. Equally reassuring, the study concludes that people tend to self-regulate "disordered eating" over longer-term stressful events such as COVID-19. As a result, the wider historical and cultural context that made COVID-19 uniquely stressful is lost from the equation.

What's lost in this framing of COVID-19 as merely one stressor among others is the experience of failures of states to respond adequately to the crisis, despite knowledge and practices proven to mitigate the damages of the pandemic, accompanied by often surreal spectacles that put on display the irrationality and inhumanity of market-driven policies. In a nutshell, the necropolitical regimes of

neoliberal capitalism were exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, many commentators have described COVID-19 in terms of a "potentially fatal internal crisis of neoliberalism" (Šumonja). Rather than framing the pandemic as an external event that had an impact on neoliberal economies, Šumonja details bi-directional causalities between the two:

> According to Rob Wallace (2020a, 2020b) evolutionary biologist and phylogeographer, the increased appearance of corona viruses like SARS, MERS or COVID-19 in the human population is a predictable outcome of agroindustry's devastating impact on natural ecosystems rather than a series of isolated incidents. It should not be forgotten that the initial reaction from most governments to the outbreak was an exercise in 'epidemiological neoliberalism' (Frey 2020). This policy bluntly exposed the politics of the whole project: pretend to do nothing while making sure that the 'natural laws' of markets keep functioning, even if it means allowing people to get sick and die from 'just another flu'. Then, in the wake of what was becoming the greatest pandemic since the Spanish Flu, the disastrous effects of 40 years of neoliberal privatisation of public health institutions were revealed. That is, the lack of staff and material capacities in underfunded state hospitals, and the complete inability of the private for-profit health industry to provide even the most basic medical equipment and treatment in the time of social need (Šumonja).

The "business as usual" approach to COVID-19 reflected in public health studies seems out of touch with the sense of social breakdown that has characterized the experience of the pandemic for many. Indeed, while the consumer research on COVID-19 and comfort food consumption is invested in harnessing the pandemic's market value, public health research under neoliberal biopolitical regimes confirms David Harvey's observation that sickness in late capitalism is defined as the inability to work (106). To have currency as a knowledge product in the neoliberal information economy, research on COVID-19 must frame it as a stressor that can be overcome to optimize productivity. However, if both comfort food and COVID-19 are historically determined by and embedded within dynamics of neoliberalism, research on pandemic comfort food needs to acknowledge and account for this embeddedness.

Biohacking Neoliberal Protocols of Consumerism and Wellness

Although the term "comfort food" is never used, Lauren Berlant's 2007 essay, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)" offers a useful reflection on comfort eating under conditions of neoliberal precarity, anxiety, and exhaustion. Berlant explains what can only described as necropolitical cynicism by describing the incoherence that arises in a biopolitical regime that equates sickness with the inability to work on one hand (pathologizing comfort eating as a 'disordered eating'), and on the other, weighs profitability against the health of the populace (deregulation of food production, the sugar lobby, etc.). Berlant writes: "Compassion and corporatism collaborate in these particular epidemics of the failing will and body as long as concern for the health of profits 'balances' concerns for the health of persons" (769). This incoherent mix of compassion and corporatism gets expressed in state-sponsored neoliberal policy, such as the "1996 statement by the U.S. at the World Food Summit, which declared that 'the right to adequate food is 'a goal or aspiration' but not an international obligation of governments'" (Berlant 770).

How might we conceptualize comfort eating in a way that neither casts the comfort eater as dupe to the predations of "big food" nor casts comfort eating naively as a form of resistance to neoliberal regimes of consumerism and wellness? Berlant offers formulations such as "regimes of exhausted practical sovereignty" and "lateral agency" to describe comfort eating in response to the stress and exhaustion of life building under neoliberal regimes:

> [F]ilial relations of eating become scenes for the production of happiness in terms of repeatable pleasure, if not health. This is the material context for so many. Working life exhausts practical sovereignty, the exercise of the will as one faces the scene of the contingencies of survival. At the same time that one builds a life the pressures of its reproduction can be exhausting. Eating is a form of ballast against wearing out; but it is also a counterdissipation in that, like other small pleasures, it can produce an experience of self-abeyance, of floating sideways (778-9).

Berlant describes comfort eating here as a form of lateral agency, that is, as an undramatic, brief and temporary form of "opting out" from the pressures of social reproduction, a ballast against the exhaustion of building a life within the necropolitical regimes of neoliberal late capitalism. This formulation is useful for thinking in excess of the *aporia* (irresolvable and inherent contradictions) of

consumerism and wellness, of corporatism and compassion that shape our thinking about comfort eating. Nonetheless, to the extent that Berlant's argument remains at the scale of sociological statistics, their conception of comfort food offers no distinction between "big food" products, such as fast food and store-bought junk foods, and homemade comfort foods. Preferring to look in the aggregate at the phenomenon of obesity as it intersects with class, race, et cetera, Berlant brackets the phenomenology of eating, and eating as individual expression.

Paul Preciado offers a way to think about pandemic comfort food eating in the biopolitical aporia of consumerism and wellness that leaves room for consideration of eating as individual expression. To begin with, the consumerist and nutritional conception of comfort food as sugary, salty, fatty foods that provide the eater with a serotonin boost aligns well with Preciado's concept of the pharmacopornographic. According to Preciado, the pharmacopornographic era is characterized by the production and regulation of what he calls "potentia gaudendi" (orgasmic force) defined as "the real or virtual strength of a body's total excitation" (41). Preciado explains, "[c]ontemporary society is inhabited by […] subjectivities defined by the substance (or substances) that supply their metabolism, by the cybernetic prostheses and various types of pharmacopornographic desires that feed the subject's actions and through which they turn into agents" (35). For Preciado, for whom the topical testosterone treatment Testogel becomes the central case study, it is critically necessary to historicize the substances that shape pharmacopornographic subjectivities. The histories of these substances are often grounded in exploitative imperialist, misogynist, racist, and transphobic practices. And yet these substances are made available on the market and consumed as though they were neutral chemical compounds absent of history and context.

A comparable example where comfort food is concerned can be found in Sidney Mintz's account of the imperialist and racialized violence that conditioned Europeans' and North Americans' addictive relationship to sugar. As a pharmacopornographic stimulant, refined sugar is neither morally neutral nor absent of historical context even though nutrition and consumer research tend to treat it as such. Moreover, as Berlant's look at the necropolitical cynicism of the sugar lobby demonstrates, sugar's present continues to be informed by exploitative racial and social class dynamics. But rather than abstaining from these substances whose histories and present-day existence bear the worst traces of European and North American imperialism, Preciado advocates strategies of biohacking, gender hacking, and glitching the neoliberal protocols that govern their consumption.

TestoJunkie intersperses critical theory chapters with an essayistic first-person account of his experience taking Testogel, critically analyzing official medical protocols (which turn out to be horrifically heteronormative and transphobic, among other things), and ultimately crafting his own hacker protocol for using the substance. The first step in Preciado's biohacking involves historicizing the substance while the second involves critical analysis of the protocol for its consumption in order to hack it for one's own designs. What's involved in biohacking pharmacopornographic substances is therefore a dual process of critique, which restores context and history to the substance, followed by consumption in violation of the protocol.

How might Preciado's practice of biohacking bring nuance to the discussion of comfort food consumption during the pandemic? For one, it allows for a critical reading of concepts like "self-medicating" and "coping mechanism" frequently invoked in public health and nutrition studies as disordered forms of self-care. While neoliberal subjectivities are caught in the aporia of wellness and consumerism, drowned in endless mixed messages, consumption protocols define food reductively in terms of caloric and nutritional composition. Food is drained of context. Additionally, and crucially, it creates space to consider the importance of historical and cultural context in the consumption and enjoyment of comfort foods.

To biohack comfort food *à la Preciado* would entail a critique of reductive dietary and consumerist protocols followed by restoration of meaningful personal context, or creation of entirely new contexts, for consumption that eschew those protocols. The next section examines an online community devoted to appreciation of cross-cultural eating under pandemic conditions. Online food communities, of course, devote a great deal of energy to restoring and creating meaningful personal contexts for the consumption of comfort food. Whereas the scene of cross-cultural eating might have traditionally taken place in so-called "ethnic" restaurants before the advent of COVID-19, here it takes place digitally and in one's own kitchen. While the creator and viewers discussed may not engage in explicit critique of consumerist and dietary protocols, they saturate their contributions with regional context, history, and personal meaning, offering many salient examples of comfort food consumption that run counter to official nutritional and consumerist protocols.

Comfort Viewing: Beryl Shereshewsky's YouTube Channel

Beryl Shereshewsky is a food YouTuber whose channel is focused on cross-cultural exchange through eating. She solicits suggestions from her viewers for dishes tied to a particular theme (e.g "how the world eats eggs," "trying your toast recipes," etc.) on her community page. She then includes clips of viewers explaining and contextualizing each chosen dish. Finally, she cooks and then eats the dish with particular focus on her reaction to the experience. The creation of her channel, the format of her videos, and much of the content of her videos, are informed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Shereshewsky had worked as a producer for Great Big Story, a streaming video hub owned by CNN that specialized in short-form video. CNN shuttered Great Big Story in September of 2020, in large part because the pandemic had taken a toll on its sales (Peterson). Soon after losing her job, Shereshewsky launched her YouTube channel. As she explains in her introductory video, "I'm gonna be exploring the world through food, in my kitchen, since travel is a bit off the table right now" ("I'm starting a channel!").

Her channel has been successful at engaging an international audience in a way that places cross-cultural eating at the center of online community formation. Audience interaction is a crucial component: Shereshewsky's videos include clips of her scrolling through her community page and frequently feature clips of her viewers presenting their favorite dishes. She is also active in responding to her viewers' comments in her channel's community page. In the period between October 2020 and October 2021, she has gained 385,000 subscribers and her most viewed videos "What the world eats when they're sick" and "Trying 5 Comfort Foods from 5 countries" have 1.4 million views each. The success of her channel resides in the extent of Shereshewsky's engagement with global online communities and in her skill at managing cross-cultural eating in her videos and cross-cultural communication in her community page. Her viewers respond with a great deal of affection and emotional intensity for Shereshewsky and her videos, creating the distinct sense of what Leela Ghandi terms an "affective community." A comment from one viewer, username Donovan Simms, captures the overall mood of Shereshewsky's videos and community page: "This video made me cry. Food is the universal connector, and if you wanna learn anything about anyone, you sit down and share a meal with them. In a time where gathering is still considered dangerous, this kind of cross-cultural exploration is needed more than ever."

Shereshewsky's videos and community page demonstrate the appeal of digital commensality under the stress of pandemic conditions while offering rich testimony to the meanings and contexts people around the world attach to the concept of comfort food. By examining her videos and community page, in contrast with the sanitized accounts of pandemic comfort food discussed in the previous section of this essay, one arrives at an understanding of comfort eating as a practice grounded in, but not fully determined by, the aporias of neoliberal subjectivity, understood perhaps best as a form of participation within pharmacopornographic economies, and yet also offering (albeit limited) forms of lateral agency, and openings for biohacking. With these considerations in mind, this essay will closely examine two videos devoted to comfort foods: "Trying 5 Comfort Foods from 5 countries" and "Comfort Foods Around the World."

Posted on November 4, 2020, "Trying 5 Comfort Foods from 5 countries" is one of the first videos on Shereshewsky's channel and it is the first to incorporate clips of community members from around the world discussing their favorite dishes, a format she returns to successfully in subsequent posts. Shereshewsky explains the new format in the opening of the video: "On my community page, I asked you guys what your favorite comfort food was, and where you lived, and so many of you responded with such amazing sounding dishes." She then offers her understanding of comfort food, which highlights the variability and value of individual experience:

> The thing for me is that comfort food is specific to the person. What my comfort food dish is, is not gonna be the same as someone else who even lives next door to me. So, instead of me presenting these as 'this is what comfort food is in X country,' I went through, picked a couple of dishes that I thought that I could recreate, and asked the people who submitted them to present them. So in this video, it's not just gonna be me. It's gonna be other people from this community, which I think is really fun and I hope it's something that we can continue to do, to share our cuisines and our cultures with one another, 'cause that's really what this channel is really about.

Each comfort food dish is presented by community members whose presentations are intercut with shots of Shereshewsky cooking the dish on a single burner portable gas stove. Igo from Wroclow, Poland presents *kluski śląskie*, a gnocchi-like potato dumpling slathered in gravy; Lindsay from Manila, Philippines present *champorado*, a chocolatey rice porridge often paired with a salted dried fish called *tuyô*; Andreea from Bucharest, Romania presents *mamaliga*, a kind of polenta

served with farmer's cheese and sour cream; Jaklyn from Jakarta, Indonesia presents *soto ayam*, an aromatic chicken soup flavored with lemongrass, lime and sambar chile paste; and Maricarmen from Cancun, Mexico presents *sopa de fideo*, a noodle soup made with a garlic-tomato chicken broth.

Each of the presenters links their chosen comfort foods to memories of being fed and cared for by their grandmothers or mothers; three of them also associate comfort food with the feeling of being stuck indoors during cold or rainy weather. Lindsay from Manila explains, "growing up, whenever it would rain, this would usually be served in our home. And eating it just brings back a lot of good childhood memories." Jaklyn from Jakarta describes *soto ayam* metaphorically as a "big warm hug to your soul," which elicits several delighted comments on the community page. Igo from Wroclow associates *kluski śląskie* with their childhood, stating that "it tastes like the feeling of comfort and safety." Along similar lines, Andreea from Bucharest links *mamaliga* to a feeling of childhood well-being: "This is the perfect comfort food for me because it always takes me back to the simplicity and safety of my childhood when my Grandma used to make this dish for me." Her formulation of comfort food as harking to an earlier time of "simplicity and safety" alongside Igo's formulation, "comfort and safety" will strike viewers, anxious and mentally exhausted from the complexity and precarity of life in a global pandemic, as especially poignant.

The interplay between cooking montages and close-up shots of Shereshewsky tasting each dish is of crucial importance in creating a "comfort viewing" experience for her viewers. Her viewers comment frequently on both aspects. However, the close-up shots of Shereshewsky tasting and responding to each dish are what evoke the most affectively intense responses from her viewers. Many comments in her community page focus on Shereshewsky's facial expressions. One viewer, username Hiyaa_Heeyaa comments, "My reason to watch your video: Beryl's eyes are so expressive. I open my eyes wide when Beryl is tasting something or trying to describe something. Can't help it, it's so so adorable." Another viewer, username Kerry Berger, adds: "I enjoy your facial expressions and smile especially when you taste something new that is unexpected and it hits you with a powerful Wow, and the experience opens your world to the wonders of culinary arts from the eater's perspective. Please keep on producing these videos. As a chef, I also gain some ideas from the dishes you introduce. Thank you." These comments emphasize the "mirror neuron" aspect of digital commensality: seeing Shereshewsky's expressions evokes the same expressions and emotions in the

viewer, imparting a vicarious sense of wonder at the novelty of the first bite of each dish followed by a sense of satiety and comfort from watching her continue to eat and express enjoyment. Indeed, some commenters describe Shereshewsky's channel itself as comfort viewing. Username Sarah Corke, for example, writes, "This channel is SO underrated, I never comment but you're one of my favourite channels, and definitely my comfort YouTuber."

In contrast with the close-up reaction shots, which center attention on Shereshewsky's facial expressions while tasting each dish, the cooking montages show very little of Shereshewsky. The viewer sees her hands stirring a pot or measuring out cornmeal in an in otherwise static overhead shot. Shereshewsky's cooking montages do not function as recipe videos; ingredients are listed but without proportions, and viewers only get a partial glimpse of the cooking process. Moreover, Shereshewsky reminds viewers that she is not a trained cook in many of her videos. The function of the cooking montages seems, rather, to be an acknowledgement of the care and work that goes into making these dishes that her viewers recommend. Describing the process of making the *mamaliga*, for example, Shereshewsky says, "I have never made polenta before. It is a lot of work. You have to stir it non-stop." Several comments in her community page fixate on this moment, sparking discussion about whether the stress and effort of cooking cancels out the comforting effect of the dish. One viewer, username lily black, writes, "It's comforting because someone cooks it for you. You don't make them by yourself" to which Shereshewsky responds, "Omg trueeeeee." Another viewer, username Alexandre Pereira Costa, writes, "This episode's curse is a blessing in disguise because after stressing out cooking you can better feel the calming effects of comfort food." Along similar lines, a viewer with username Ekua Walker writes, "I think the little stressors that happened making the dishes gave you a chance to really put the 'comfort' part of the dish to test."

One might unpack this from a few different angles. First, the framing of cooking and comfort eating in terms of quantifiable degrees of stress and relief that might neutralize each other's effects places this discussion squarely in the realm of the pharmacopornographic. Indeed, several comments on Shereshewsky's community page construe comfort food and comfort viewing in terms of serotonin boosts. However, context always plays a role in creating the right conditions for these. Two contexts in particular matter where the visualization of labor is concerned: First, the focus on Shereshewky's labor in the kitchen underscores the conception of comfort food as a form of care. It brings attention to the embodied nature of the work that

goes into providing care. Indeed, Shereshewsky's cooking montages serve as a metonymy for the invisible labor that goes into her content, from sourcing hard-to-find ingredients to filming and video editing. Highlighting this labor is crucial to her viewers' enjoyment of the tasting reaction shots. Shereshewsky's viewers associate the kitchen labor she does for them with the feeling of being cared for. One viewer, username Catherine Del Spina, writes, echoing Jaklyn's hug in a bowl metaphor, "Speaking of hugs in a bowl…Beryl, You are like a hug for all of us."

Second, the focus on Shereshewky's labor in the kitchen highlights the work that goes into cross-cultural communication. Although her viewers tend to index on the "wow" moment after Shereshewky tastes a new dish from another place, it is her willingness to learn and execute new cooking techniques and to risk failure that places her on equal ground with her community members. It creates fertile grounds for cross-cultural exchange. Her cooking montages serve as an invitation to viewers in the know to debate local culinary aesthetics and cultural norms. Commenters engage vigorously with this aspect, offering advice on cooking technique, critiques of texture, choice of garnish, choice of ingredients, and so on. They debate amongst one another about regional variants of the dish, often switching from English into their local language. The embodied aspect of cooking matters in this respect as well since the ergonomics of preparing these global comfort dishes is as culturally determined as their consumption and culinary aesthetic.

Shereshewsky's subsequent videos, including her second comfort food video, begin to include outtakes of Shereshewsky cooking. Many of these show wider angle shots of her as she hurls an expletive after getting burned, for example, or yanks an overflowing pot away from the burner. The inclusion of these kitchen mishaps situates Shereshewsky as a student, learning to attain a better understanding and appreciation of another culture, but not yet attaining mastery. This is crucial since, in the tasting reaction shots, Shereshewsky appreciates every single dish she tries. Most of her viewers comment on how impressed they are with her cross-cultural eating skills (e.g., Filipino viewers express delight and surprise that she eats the head and tail of the Tuyô and enjoys it). However, it seems to bother some that she never expresses distaste for any of the dishes she tries. Legislation of taste and distaste for certain foods is, after all, an age-old way to police identitarian boundaries of self and other. For these viewers, it appears improbable that Shereshewsky could like everything that she eats.

The interest in Shereshewsky's distaste for certain foods is so great among viewers that she responds with a series of videos entitled "Foods I don't like" in

which she challenges community members from around the world to suggest local preparations that might change her mind about ingredients she dislikes such as bitter melon and cantaloupe. These "Foods I don't like" videos add narrative tension to the tasting reaction shots that isn't there in the comfort food videos. Viewers wait, curious to see whether she'll like a dish or not. In her comfort food posts, by contrast, the narrative tension resides in the cooking montages and outtakes where we see her struggle as an amateur cook. The tension is resolved in the close-up reaction shots where facial expression of wonder is immediately followed by an expression of satiety and comfort. This structure is crucial to the success of her formula in offering vicarious enjoyment and comfort to her viewers.

Shereshewsky's channel offers an archive of the present through which to examine and reflect on comfort food as it is conceptualized and consumed in various global contexts. Scholarship on comfort food often wavers between attributing a uniquely Anglo-American genealogy to the concept and understanding it as a universal concept. Jones and Long, for example, write, "[t]he idea initially appears to be straightforward and self-explanatory–it is food that comforts. A closer examination, however, raises numerous questions about the concept, the specific foods belonging to this category, and the nature of food itself […] It is unclear whether comfort food is a universal concept or is particular to modern, Western societies" (5-6).

Shereshewsky's viewers offer their own definitions of comfort food in their comments that suggests they understand it as an interplay between biochemical composition and individual experience shaped by various cultural factors. Some viewers index on the biochemical. Username Kalandaari writes, for example, "'Fat is comforting', or as we say is France, 'Le gras, c'est la vie!' (Fat is life)." But most viewers agree with Shereshewsky's formulation of comfort food as a kind of universal particular. Username Mud Puppy comments:

> At the beginning, she clarified that "comfort food" is a personal thing, so she said she wasn't going to claim that any one dish represents an entire culture or country. I take pleasure in cooking, so it doesn't matter if the dish is difficult or time-consuming. "Comfort food" is, indeed, different for ever[y] person. I live in Indiana, yet MY favorite comfort food is a Dutch dish called stamppot. Kale and mashed potatoes with smoked sausage.

Along similar lines, username Mulan 121 writes, "I feel like comfort food is this universal thing we all love and can bond over. Soup, rice pudding, stew, toasted

sandwich. In the video they might have been from specific cultures, but we all have a version of them that reminds us of a favourite childhood dish."

The tautological definition of comfort food as "food that comforts" makes it highly mobile as a concept; it becomes a universal particular in the sense that the concept has global relevance but is also inflected at the individual level with different contextual meanings. What's more, the Anglo-American genealogy of the concept need not be at odds with the tautological definition if we bear in mind the fact that the Anglo-American world was largely a driving force in the economic and cultural neoliberalization of the globe. Coined in 1977, the expression "comfort food" gained cultural relevance within the specific context of the rise of economic and cultural neoliberalism. Out of the increasingly deterritorialized flows of global financial and cultural capital and the remaking of social relations, which had begun to accelerate in the late 1970s, comfort food emerged as a kind of synechdoche for a newly commodified conception of the family. So while global economic inequalities still persist, it is also true that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to comparable conditions of precarity, shared affective regimes shaped by cycles of anxiety and comfort-seeking, throughout those parts of the world that were most dramatically changed by neoliberalization, particularly in the Anglo-American world and its neo-colonies (South Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia) where compressed economic development has given rise to production of new cultural forms organized around stress relief.

Conclusion

Returning to Preciado, we might ask whether Shereshewsky and her community manage to biohack comfort food despite reductive consumerist and wellness protocols surrounding the concept. Certainly, Andreea and Igo engage in a version of biohacking by linking the comfort derived from eating certain foods to an earlier time of "simplicity and safety" or of "comfort and safety." One should not construe these formulations simply as nostalgic expressions of desire for a time free of adult responsibility. That would be falling prey to the very same neoliberal discourses of self-reliance and privatized happiness that trap individuals in isolating cycles of anxiety and shame. Indeed, by reducing comfort food eating to biochemical excitation, neoliberal discourses of wellness occlude the communitarian aspects of safety and comfort that have long been associated with eating and commensality throughout most of the world. Shereshewsky's community reminds us that the

neoliberal status quo of precarity, anxiety, and crisis ordinariness is not the natural state of things. Indeed, their richly contextualized accounts of comfort eating throughout the globe serve as a reminder that another world is possible, to echo the famous EZLN motto, *otro mundo es posible*.

Yet as the anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay rightly pointed out, Shereshewsky does not fully mount a critique of comfort food as Preciado does with Testogel. Shereshewsky and her contributors do eschew neoliberal protocols of comfort food consumption by simply enjoying their comfort foods without concern for caloric or biochemical content. They saturate comfort food consumption with commensal context (family, community, regionality, etc.) even when they find themselves eating in isolation during pandemic lockdowns. And this account of comfort eating is certainly more reassuring than the bleak scenes Berlant depicts in "Slow Death." However, there's not much to suggest that Shereshewsky's online community has moved beyond "lateral agency" and "exhausted practical sovereignty" in their comfort food consumption.

Shereshewsky comes close in her second comfort food video. She opens it by confessing that she has struggled in the past with eating and self-image, going on to explain that therapy helped her reorient her attitude towards food and embrace the pleasures of meaningful eating, which her viewers are now able to enjoy. It is reasonable to assume that her therapeutic process involved a certain degree of critique, that is, learning to attribute her food-related struggles to culturally and historically determined ideologies rather than to failures of the will and of individual responsibility. While this may be true, Shereshewsky's confession about therapy turns out to be a tie-in for her sponsor, the online counseling platform BetterHelp. Most of her viewers applaud the sponsorship (username Amalia Tardiff writes, "Kudos on another seamless sponsored video. Make that money honey!"). However, one viewer, krunchykrystal, expresses concern that Shereshewsky has hitched her wagon to an exploitative sponsor:

> I adore you videos so much! I have to say though as a licensed therapist it really sucks to see you partner with BetterHelp. So many YouTubers I love have done so too not knowing that they along with TalkSpace and Cerebral exploit therapists, mine client data, and have completely unethical practices. Please PLEASE get a local therapist and don't use this tech company or any other app like them. They are exploitative and dangerous [sad face emoji].

The BetterHelp sponsorship serves as a reminder that, as much as Shereshewsky might work to create a carefully curated experience for her online community, her

channel is not immune to the more exploitative aspects of pharmacopornographic enjoyment or what Preciado terms the "pornification of labor" (274). Indeed, while this essay has thus far highlighted the redemptive dimensions of Shereshewsky's approach to comfort food and comfort viewing, it is also true that a portion of viewers engage her YouTube channel in a more crassly transactional way. Numerous comments fixate on her physical appearance in often demeaning and sexist language. Shereshewsky rebuff these comments with self-assured humor and feminist wit, modeling practical tactics for engaging sexist trolling for her community. But as hard as she works to create a sense of commensality on her YouTube video channel, the medium itself is so thoroughly determined by neoliberal logics, it is difficult to imagine a way for Shereshewsky to overcome the pornification of labor. If she succeeds in reframing comfort food in excess of its biochemical components, it must also be noted that her channel might never fully escape the pharmacopornographic constraints of monetized cultural labor.

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Grocery Shopping During COVID-19: A Privileged Perspective

AYUSH SHAH

We stood in line on the cold, concrete, long-slabbed floors of the Costco warehouse for what felt like hours. The queue extended to the horizon – or at least to the milk section – and people scattered across every square inch like ants skittering across the forest floor. Towering above the aisles were shopping carts filled with everything from bags of rice to more toilet paper than families could consume in an entire year.

It felt like we were in a movie – a pandemic movie – except that we were not. Every television in Eden Prairie's Costco on March 18, 2020, played Bill Ackman's plea on CNBC to the President of the United States to shut down all nonessential sections of the economy. Global stock markets were in free fall, IRAs were depleting, and most of all, America's faith in its stability was crashing. In Bill Ackman's own words, "Hell is coming." My own family's cart was filled with $457 worth of rice, dried beans, flour, and any nonperishable items we could find. Our next trip to the grocery store was uncertain, and we did not want to take any chances. It felt like a state of nature – every family fending for itself. But could you really blame anyone for that sentiment?

As we unloaded over $400 worth of nutrition from the car and into the garage, wearing our coveted N95 masks, I could not help but think how selfish and privileged we were in that instance. Beyond the cost of the groceries, our home in suburban Minnesota had the capacity to hold an excess of supplies: we have two refrigerators, multiple pantries, and a storage room the size of a large bedroom in the basement. But what if we could not hold the supplies? What if we did not have the refrigerator space? Or the extra storage space if we lived in a multi-family unit? And beyond all, what if we did not have $457 to spare to hoard at least a couple months' worth of essential ingredients?

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it felt like the status of one's family was dictated by whether they could source organic berries or eat grass-fed beef. Within a matter of days, the status of one's family was dictated by whether they could source overpriced hand sanitizer, N95 masks, and Clorox bleach wipes.

Reflecting on this shopping experience, I cannot help but think of a famous Ron Swanson quote from *Parks and Recreation*: "Capitalism: God's way of determining who is smart, and who is poor." On any ordinary day, I would laugh at the comedic point that Ron Swanson makes; however, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst deteriorating supply chains, I gained firsthand experience of the divide that was created in the simple act of grocery shopping. If you could afford to buy groceries months in advance, had a place to keep the produce without it spoiling, and had a stable income to not have to worry about overpaying for groceries, then— and only then—did you get to feel the safety of having enough food in your house. At the beginning, COVID-19 did not discriminate against who it infected. You could have been a wealthy vacationer on a cruise ship or a middle-class child in urban Atlanta. COVID-19 did not seem to care.[1] However, grocery shopping, a seemingly mundane task, segregated the rich from the poor by not only the quality of the foods that each were able to buy, but whether they actually got to buy food in the first place.

The question I still ask myself, months after standing in that Costco, is "How did the simple act of grocery shopping become so discriminatory?" For me, the answer to this question was safety. We wanted to feel safe. During the week before the first lockdown, it felt like we were all acting in a triggered "flight or fight" response, and the only way we knew how to act was to prepare for the next Armageddon. If we had enough food in our homes, then it felt like we could at least sustain ourselves until the sun rose again. Through our collective actions to make ourselves feel more comfortable, we inflated the cost of common household products that are required for people from all backgrounds and walks of life. And for this, I feel terrible.

But did *we*, along with the multitude of other shoppers, do anything wrong? Were we supposed to act in another way? To this follow-up question, I have no clear answer. If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught me anything, it is that we can only do the best knowing what we know in that instant. In that instant in Costco, it

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[1] As COVID-19 spread more, it became clear that people of racial minority and those in lower economic classes were impacted more by the virus, but here I am talking about the very beginning of the pandemic when little was known about how or where it spread.

felt like we were fending for ourselves in times of mass uncertainty, and we had the means to do so. Instead of trying to wash my hands of any wrongdoings or justify my actions, I thoroughly acknowledge that my family's financial privilege allowed us extra comfort and a sustained peace of mind. In my day-to-day life, I will work to decrease disparities in my community. But if we were to land ourselves in a true Armageddon, would I engage in buying a surplus of food like I did on March 18, 2020? Yes, for I am only human.

COVID Comfort: Food Advertising, Family, and Unity During a Pandemic

DEBBIE DANOWSKI

> We may not be able to gather together but we can grill together.
> -Oscar Mayer

> Your country needs you to stay on your couch and order in.
> -Burger King

As the COVID-19 virus swept through state by state and nation by nation, US Americans were forced into quarantine. With daily lives disrupted and eating outside of homes drastically curtailed, food producers increased their advertising to remind consumers about the ways in which they offered unity, service, and family ties as evidenced by lines from those commercials mentioned previously, both of which aired during the COVID-19 lockdown. Not only were these advertisements designed to promote products as most are, but they were also used to offer hope to frightened U.S. Americans fearful of doing even the most routine activities such as grocery shopping or eating in restaurants. Studying food advertisements during this time reveals "deep-rooted beliefs and values that characterize a culture and endorse a particular worldview" (Kelso 120). As Kelso points out, "the media in general, through the messages and themes they present, tend to convey dominant ideology" that "contribute to symbolically reinforcing our current way of life" and "indirectly function[ing] as an educational force" (122).

The majority of COVID-19 research related to food focuses on food consumption changes during the pandemic, most with the goal of determining the healthiness of these changes. There also exists a body of advertising research

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focusing on the themes, images, and content of advertisements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, however, there is little research about the themes used in food advertisements broadcast during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus leaving a void in not only this food advertising research but also in the understanding of the cultural ideology during this unprecedented time in history.

The current study will help fill the void in COVID-19 pandemic-related research by analyzing twelve food advertisements that were broadcast during the pandemic to determine the themes present in each. This study will draw upon the thematic analysis process outlined by Herzog and colleagues, based on Braun and Clarke's guide (Herzog et al. 385-401). In conjunction with this, the use of textual analysis combined with case study methodology as outlined by Beetham in her study of women's magazines will also be used.

Literature Review

While there is a large body of food research related to the COVID-19 pandemic, much of it focuses on consumption changes to determine the healthiness or diet changes occurring during the pandemic (Coulthard et al.; Das et al.; Fiorella et al.; Harrison et al.; Marty et al.; Özenoğlu et al.; Palmer et al.; Ruggiero et al.; Sosna; Tribst et al.). This amount of food-related research is important to note in relation to the study of food advertisements as it points to the importance placed on food analysis during the COVID-19 pandemic. The international scope of consumption research surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the emphasis on food in both the United States and across the world, demonstrate the importance of this research. People placed even greater importance on food during the pandemic due to stress and thus sought comfort from and used food as a coping strategy (Coulthard et al.). This makes researching the themes present in US food advertisements during this time valuable in understanding the role these advertisements and food portrayals played during a national pandemic.

Advertising research focusing on the themes, images, and content about COVID-19 as well as messaging about the pandemic (Andreu-Sánchez and Martín-Pascual; Arthur; Banker and Park; Hussian et al.) has recently been published. At this time, however, specific themes used in food advertisements broadcast during the COVID-19 pandemic is lacking. Currently, there is a void in COVID-19 food advertising research and in the understanding of the cultural ideology during this unprecedented time in history.

Food Advertising Themes. In general, the study of content in food advertisements is common and a great majority of the research focuses on advertisements targeted at children, the nutritional content of the food advertised, and the food choices made after viewing the advertisements (Batada et al.; Castonguay and Bakir; Castonguay et al.; Egberts and Riley; Emond et al. "Exposure to Child-Directed TV"; Emond et al. "Children's Food and Beverage Promotion). Some research exists which examines language and themes in food advertising. Griffin and Berry point out in their study of religious language and food advertising, the importance of researching and understanding messaging in advertisements. They note, "Advertising plays a crucial role in this culture of consumption and is both a reflection of culture and a participant in the creation of culture" (Griffin & Berry 46). These ideas of "reflection of culture" and "participant in the creation of culture" are pertinent to the current study. The analysis of themes in COVID-19 food advertisements provides a reflection of the current mindset at a specific time and helps further understand the creation of the cultural behaviors present during this period. Thematic analysis points to the societal feelings, values, and culture during an extraordinary national crisis, which helps researchers to further understand US American society through food advertisements.

Food and Culture. Among the research regarding food as a reflection of culture and a means of understanding different civilizations and nations, Guerlain notes, "Even for something so basic as fast-food the way it is consumed and the rituals around fast food outlets are quite different in New York and Paris..." and that "[i]n Moscow it is rather chic to eat out at McDonald's, which obviously is not the case on Chicago's South side" (30). Expanding on this, Crowther notes that, "life histories constructed around food" help to track traditions across generations and draw meaning from "the social life of food" in various cultures (xxii) and that the "activities surrounding food acquisition, preparation, and consumption lend themselves to cross-cultural comparison" that provides insight into the lives of others "through a shared everyday experience of eating" (xxi). It's easy to transfer this "cross-cultural comparison" to traumatic periods within a society, such as a national pandemic, as in the current study.

The study of food and culinary practices "is a complex set of power relations that involve race, class, and gender identities in a dynamic system of production and consumption" (Davis 365). "More critics are coming to regard food as a cultural form analogous to literature or music, as a repository for social meaning, and as a means for studying and understanding human civilization" (Davis 374).

It's important to note that included in the "production and consumption" to which Davis refers is the promotion of food and the ways in which different cultures advertise food products. The advertising practices used to promote food are also a reflection of culture and society in the same way that the study of food provides insight into other cultures. The study of these promotional practices during a national crisis is especially important in understanding the culture and "the social life of food" during a specific time.

Williams-Forson notes the role food plays for Black women as a societal power structure. Rather than examine typical stereotypes of Black women and chicken in popular media, Williams-Forson's study expanded to include the stories surrounding those foods typically identified as being "Black" (2). She points to the story of Booker T. Washington's mother walking for miles with a stolen chicken to feed her family (3). As in the current study, Williams-Forson also analyzes food advertisements as a means of reflecting American culture. She points to a 1999 KFC commercial that attempted to create an animated version of the company's spokesperson, Colonel Sanders, in an attempt to "make the Colonel 'cool'" (5). She describes her experience viewing the commercial as seeing "a dancing Colonel bouncing basketballs, and buckets of fried chicken" which "was the suggestion of age-old stereotypes that linked African American men to playing basketball and eating chicken" (5). Observations such as this, illustrate the importance of studying food advertisements as a means of identifying cultural attitudes and behaviors and, as in the case of the current study, the themes used to express them.

Food Advertisements in Current Study

The food advertisements used in the current study are a mix of several different types of food companies, which include fast-food and traditional restaurants, food manufacturers, and a grocery store. It's important to note that during the pandemic, grocery stores and food manufacturers did not need to advertise as urgently as restaurants which experienced significant changes in sales and operating procedures due to the pandemic (USDA). For example, most restaurants were closed for in-person dining and forced to create take-out procedures if not already in place (USDA). Advertising the availability of these foods became vital to the financial viability of these establishments. On the other hand, food manufacturers and grocery stores experienced dramatic increases in sales and did not have as great a need to advertise their availability during the pandemic. The increased number of

restaurant advertisements is reflected in the variety of advertisements included in this study.

Advertisements from fast-food restaurants in the current study include Burger King "Stay Home of the Whopper," McDonald's "Most Important Meals," Jersey Mike's Subs "Feeding America," and Popeyes "Contactless Pickup." Those from restaurants include Denny's "Waived Delivery Fees," and Olive Garden "Buy One Take One." Those from food manufacturers include Doritos "The Last Dorito," Oscar Mayer "Front Yard Cookout," Post Cereal "Keep Breakfast On The Family Table, Grape-nuts "Love You Too," and Kraft Heinz "We Got You America." An advertisement from one grocery store, Save A Lot "We're Here For You," is also included. All of these advertisements aired during 2020 with the exception of the "Grape-nuts Love You Too" one which was posted on Facebook on February 10, 2021.

Materials and Methods

Thematic Analysis. The foundation of this study is based on a thematic analysis process by Herzog and colleagues, in which they adapted the six phases of thematic analysis, originally outlined by Braun and Clarke in their guide, for media scholars, which includes the following steps: 1) Familiarize yourself with your data; 2) Generate initial code; 3) Search for themes; 4) Review themes; 5) Define and name themes; and 6) Produce the report (Herzog, et al. 385-401). The Herzog adaptation will be used in the current study.

Textual Analysis. Additionally, textual analysis combined with case study methodology will be used. This process is outlined by Beetham in her study of women's magazines and is a relevant research methodology for analyzing media texts. As Beetham notes, case study methodology allows for research about "expressions of ideas and ideology" in media texts as well as study about representations of "particular moments" (6). Though she refers to women's magazines, it's not difficult to translate these ideas for use in advertising texts considering the similarities.

The importance of analyzing media texts also has been reinforced by public health professionals. "Using content analysis, researchers can quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts. Researchers can then make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of surrounding the

text" (Columbia Public Health). Once again, it is not difficult to translate these ideas for use in analyzing food advertisements due to the similarities.

COVID-19 Food Advertising Themes

This study creates a list of themes from an initial viewing of twelve pandemic-related food commercials to form a representative case study. These commercials were found through a Google search using the words "COVID-19," "coronavirus," and "food advertisements" with the goal of representing restaurants, grocery stores, and food products as equally as possible. Though there were many advertisements during each period, only those ads that made specific reference to the pandemic were included in this study.

The list of themes created included the following: anger, community, family/friends, fear, generosity, gratitude, love, loyalty, patriotism, safety, service, and unity. Though each of the commercials viewed presented comfort in one way or another, it was decided that the concept was too abstract and could be better focused using other themes such as safety, service, and unity thus allowing for a more accurate and narrow analysis of the themes present. Definitions for each of the themes were created based on initial viewing of the food advertisements, see Table 1.

To distinguish similar themes from each other, specific definitions were created. For example, the "Family/Friends" theme is similar to the "Love" theme. Arguably, images of family and friends together could easily encompass the theme of love though the focus of the commercial may not be on family and friends. To allow for this, the researcher recorded the "Love" theme only when directed solely at consumers of the product and not shown or spoken of in the commercials by actors. Similarly, the "Unity" and "Community" themes were recorded only when specific words of "together" and "community" were used in the advertisement, thus helping to focus on the true spirit of each theme. This is also the case with the "Generosity" and "Service" themes which are differentiated by specific definitions and wording.

Anger	uses words "angry," "upset," and/or images of anger
Community	uses word "community"
Family/Friends	uses words or images of people in same living space or connecting online
Fear	uses words or images of missing out, losing something, not having enough, getting sick
Generosity	uses words "donate," "give away," "free" and/or offers sales/discounts, donations, giveaways, free products, free delivery and sales or discounts on products themselves directly to consumers
Gratitude	uses words "thank you" and/or gives product away to essential workers
Love	uses word "love" directed towards customers
Loyalty	uses words "always there for you," and/or images of continued product production
Patriotism	uses words "America" and/or "country" or images of flag, patriotic symbols
Safety	uses words "contactless pickup," "free delivery," and/or anything related to cleanliness
Service	uses the words "help," "helping," "doing our part," and offers discounts, giveaways, donations to charitable groups or shows images of workers in their companies showing up for work to keep food available for others
Unity	uses word "together," and/or images of people together online or in person

Table 1. Definitions of themes

Thematic Analysis Chart

A thematic analysis chart was created, which included the following categories Product/Ad, Visual, Audio, Themes, and Link. The name of the product advertised was listed under the Product/Ad heading. The visual action in the advertisement was listed under the Visual heading. The audio elements of the advertisement were listed under the Audio heading. The themes present in the advertisement from the researcher-created definitions were listed under the Themes heading. The online link to the ad was listed under the Link heading.

An entry in the chart was created for every ad. Each ad was viewed a minimum of six times. The first viewing was to record initial data in the Product, Visual, and Audio columns of the thematic analysis chart. The second viewing was used to, as outlined by Herzog and colleagues, search for the presence of themes, while the third and fourth viewings were used to confirm the listed themes. The fifth and sixth viewings were to confirm the accuracy of the data entered into the chart and to review the themes with a second coder. The results were tabulated by using the find

tool in Microsoft Word to determine the number and types of occurrences for each advertisement.

Results

Fifty-seven themes were noted in the twelve COVID-19 pandemic food advertisements studied. One theme, "Unity," occurred in every commercial studied for a total of twelve occurrences. The "Service" theme was next with nine incidents in all but Doritos "The Last Dorito," Denny's "Waived Delivery Fees," and Grape-nuts, "Love You Too" commercials. This was followed by "Family/Friends" with eight occurrences, "Safety" with seven, "Generosity" with six and "Loyalty" with five occurrences. On the lower end, the themes of "Anger" and "Love" were represented only once, both were in the Grape-nuts "Love You Too" commercial broadcast on Facebook during a shortage of the cereal due to the pandemic. The theme of "Community" was shown in two commercials, Oscar Mayer's "Front Yard Cookout" and Jersey Mike's Subs "Feeding America." There were also two occurrences of the themes "Fear" (Doritos "Last Dorito" and Grape-nuts "Love You Too"), "Gratitude" ("Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper" and McDonald's "Most Important Meals") and "Patriotism" ("Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper" and Kraft-Heinze "We Got You America"). These occurrences are represented in table 2.

The average number of themes in all twelve advertisements was 4.75 with four commercials ("Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper," Olive Garden "Buy One Take One," Oscar Mayer "Front Yard Cookout" and Kraft-Heinz "We Got You America") containing a high of six each and Doritos "Last Dorito" including a low of three thematic occurrences.

Anger	Community	Friends/Family	Fear	Generosity	Gratitude	Love	Loyalty	Patriotism	Safety	Service	Unity
				BK	BK			BK	BK	BK	BK
		SAL					SAL			SAL	SAL
		DS	DS								DS
		DY		DY					DY		DY
		OG		OG			OG		OG	OG	OG
	OM	OM		OM					OM	OM	OM
		PC					PC		PC	PC	PC
GN			GN			GN					GN
		KH					KH	KH	KH	KH	KH
				MD	MD					MD	MD
	JMS			JMS			JMS			JMS	JMS
		PE							PE	PE	PE

BK = "Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper," **SAL** = Save A Lot "We're Here For You," **DS** = Doritos "The Last Dorito," **DY** = Denny's "Waived Delivery Fees," **OG** = Olive Garden "Buy One Take One," **OM** = Oscar Mayer "Front Yard Cookout," **PC** = Post Cereal "Keep Breakfast On Family Table," **GN** = Grape-nuts "Love You Too," **KH** = Kraft-Heinze "We Got You America," **MD** = McDonald's "Most Important Meals," **JMS** = Jersey Mike's Subs "Feeding America," **PE** = Popeyes "Contactless Pickup"

Table 2. Themes in COVID-19 advertisements

Discussion

Due to the isolation of quarantine during the pandemic, it is not surprising that the theme of "Unity" is present in all twelve of the commercials since there was a great need for food advertisers to connect with their customers on as many levels as possible during a national lockdown. This connection was especially necessary for restaurants, most of which were not allowed to have in-person dining. Not only was a theme of "Unity" a comforting thought for their patrons, but it was also a survival technique for businesses and food companies needing to remind customers of their support as they got through the pandemic together. This encouraged bonding which, in turn, the businesses hoped would result in sales. Similarly, the "Service" theme as shown by the large majority of companies offering discounts, giveaways or "doing their part" to help is also not surprising as a promotional technique to encourage loyalty and in a different way, unity. The actual surprise is in those companies not including the "Service" theme in their COVID-19 pandemic advertising since this theme is the easiest way to promote connection during a

national crisis since the inability of many to leave their homes to get food during the pandemic provided a ready-made method for food advertisers to show customers how service-orientated they were by offering contactless pickup and delivery of their products.

Doritos "The Last Dorito." The Doritos "The Last Dorito" did not include the "Service" theme and it included the fewest number of themes with a low of three occurrences. In this commercial, a young man is shown quarantined in his apartment. He pulls the last Dorito out of the bag while an announcer says, "Down to your last Dorito and the delivery is two weeks away? Consider your steps wisely." As music begins and continues, the man is shown watching television, lying in bed, working out, on the computer talking to family, then lying on the floor. During each activity, he takes a very small bite of the same Dorito even sleeping next to it until in the near final shot his hand is shown with a very small piece left which he puts in his mouth as the doorbell rings and a voice announces, "Groceries." In this commercial, the themes of "Family/Friends," "Fear" and "Unity" are shown with the "Fear" theme being the most prevalent. The "Family/Friends" and "Unity" themes are represented by the images of an online family chat, which is a small portion of the entire commercial and during which time the young man is focused on the one remaining Dorito.

The themes recorded match the outlined definitions for this study, however, there are often subtle subtexts in each commercial that are difficult to categorize based on specific definitions, which is where the case study approach adds further depth to the current research. In the case of "The Last Dorito" commercial, the technique of humor is used to promote unity with others who are most likely in similar situations and missing, if not Doritos, some other food they aren't able to easily get without putting their health at risk by breaking quarantine. The unity portrayed in this commercial and others can be an important way of comforting a nation through the advertisement of food by reminding customers that they are not alone.

Denny's "Waived Delivery Fees." The Denny's "Waived Delivery Fees" commercial did not include the "Service" theme, however, this commercial can best be described as utilitarian, working to provide information about waived delivery fees and encouraging customers to order Denny's food delivered to their door. Though focused and short, this commercial contained the themes of "Family/Friends," "Generosity," "Safety," and "Unity." The themes of "Family/Friends" and "Unity" were represented by images of family and friends

eating Denny's food together while laughing and/or watching television, as well as in the announcer's words, "If you're staying home with friends and family, you can still order all your favorites because right now Denny's is waiving delivery fees…" The acknowledgement of people staying home in words and images as well as the free delivery fees represent the themes of "Safety" and "Generosity" respectively.

In this advertisement, it is understandable that the theme of "Service" is not present and is replaced by the similar theme of "Generosity" due to the utilitarian nature of the commercial. The differences in the themes of "Generosity" and "Service" are subtle. "Generosity" is used for donations, giveaways, free products, free delivery and sales or discounts on products themselves directly to consumers while "the theme of "Service" uses the words "help," "helping," "doing our part," and offers discounts, giveaways, donations to charitable groups or shows images of workers in their companies showing up for work to keep food available for others.

Grape-nuts "Love You Too." The Grape-nuts "Love You Too" Facebook advertisement did not include either the "Generosity" or the "Service" themes. This was also the only commercial to include the themes of "Anger" and "Love." The advertisement opens with a shot of a hand on a screen over an article about the pandemic triggering a Grape-nuts shortage. Following this, there are various Tweets over images of unhappy, even pouting people, some of which include a Tweet from Martin H.: "This is becoming super serious and more frightening" and a Tweet from Marianne F.: "Before I go to the ends of the earth, have Grape Nuts been discontinued?" Other Tweets include, "Post has halted production of @grapenutscereal and I want to know the @WhiteHouse is going to do about it" from Ana S. a Tweet from Jeanne G., "WHERE ARE THE GRAPE-NUTS??????," and lastly, a Tweet from Cbo55, "Never worried about our home being targeted for a burglary until I found a large box of #Grapnuts in our pantry." The next to the last shot is an image of a little girl whose hands are being held by adults swinging her. Her face is covered by a box of Grape-nuts. The last shot is Grape-nuts with the words, "Love You, Too."

In addition to the "Anger and "Love" themes, the "Fear" and "Unity" themes were also present. Though there is an image of what appears to be parents swinging their child around in a circle, the researcher decided not to record this as an occurrence of the "Family/Friends" theme since the child's face was covered by a box of Grape-nuts and all of the other images were of only one person in each shot. The "Unity" theme was represented by the online Tweets shown in an electronic community, while the "Fear" theme was shown in the Tweets themselves where

Martin H. uses the word "frightening" to describe shortages. Of all the advertisements studied, this commercial is the only one which doesn't offer support or encouragement about getting through the pandemic or providing service to help others do the same beyond the message of "Love You, Too." The purpose of this advertisements seems to be to simply acknowledge consumers' frustrations and remind them that the company loves them.

"Generosity" Theme. The theme of "Generosity" in the form of giving away free meals is present in five commercials ("Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper," Olive Garden "Buy One Take One," Oscar Mayer "Front Yard Cookout," McDonald's "Most Important Meals," and Jersey Mike's Subs "Feeding America") with three different methods. The first of these methods was to give away meals to first responders. In the Burger King commercial the company urges people to "do their part and Burger King will do their part by waiving the delivery fees" which makes everyone safer and "makes you a couchpopatriot." At the end of the commercial, the announcer says that Burger King is donating Whoppers to nurses. Similarly, in the McDonald's advertisement the announcer says, "After billions and billions, these are the most important meals we've ever served. Through May 5th we'll be feeding first responders and healthcare workers thank you meals for free. It's our honor to serve you" as a McDonald's worker first polishes letters then hangs them on space below the logo outside to read, "FIRST RESPONDERS AND HEALTHCARE WORKERS ENJOY A THANK YOU MEAL FOR FREE."

The second method used to express the theme of "Generosity" shown in the commercials studied was by giving customers a free meal as in the Olive Garden "Buy One Take One' advertisement. In this commercial, families are show eating Olive Garden food at home while laughing and having fun while an announcer says, "At Olive Garden, we're all family here and we want to help you feed yours during this difficult time, so we brought back "Buy One Take One" for just $12.99 available for car side pickup or delivery. Choose a classic favorite and get another one on us so you can take home two nights of comforting food and do it with peace of mind only at Olive Garden." This type of generosity is designed to both provide meals for others and to sustain sales of the company's food during a lockdown, which without car side pickup or delivery was not possible.

The third method of expressing the theme of "Generosity" among those food advertisements studied was to give away meals through a nonprofit organization. The Oscar Mayer "Front Yard Cookout" commercial opens with empty streets in

neighborhoods then to a man wheeling a grill to his front yard. Images of neighbors bringing grills and iced tea while waving at each other from their front yards followed by images of hot dogs grilling ends with a high angle shot of a cul-de-sac with houses and neighbors outside at cookouts while an announcer says, "We may not be able to gather together but we can grill together. Oscar Mayer invites you to take your backyard cookouts to the front. On May 2 join us for the Oscar Mayer Front Yard Cookout. Enjoy sharing a meal together but safely apart while we share a million meals with Share America and every time you use the hashtag #FrontYardCookout Oscar Mayer will donate an additional meal up to a million more. Let's head out front and give back."

Similarly, the Jersey Mike's Subs "Feeding America" advertisement expresses the theme of "Gratitude" through nonprofit giving. The commercial begins with a shot of the company's founder, Peter Cancro dressed in a suit with both the Jersey Mike's Subs company logo and the Feeding America logo to the left of the screen. He says, "Growing up in my hometown I watched two local businessmen give unconditionally to their local community and with that Jersey Mike's mission statement was born, giving, making a difference in someone's life, and in that spirit, we invite you for a special weekend this Saturday and Sunday. We will donate 20% of all sales to Feeding America from coast to coast. So, please, let's give and make a difference in someone's life."

"Safety" Theme. As with the "Unity" theme, it's not surprising that the topic of "Safety" is present in seven of the advertisements aired during the pandemic due to the need for customers to feel safe buying food during a national pandemic. These are "Burger King Stay Home of the Whopper," Denny's "Waived Delivery Fees," Olive Garden "Buy One Take One," Oscar Mayer "Front Yard Cookout," Post Cereal "Keep Breakfast On The Family Table," Kraft-Heinz "We Got You America" and Popeyes "Contactless Pickup." Though the majority of these involve advertising contactless pickup, delivery or curbside pickup or, as in the case of the previously mentioned Oscar Mayer "Front Yard Cookout" commercial a safe way of gathering, two of the advertisements (Post Cereal "Keep Breakfast On The Family Table" and Kraft-Heinz "We Got You America") have a different focus. The Post Cereal uses the theme of "Safety" as it relates to their workers. The advertisement begins with words over cereal bowls. "A bowl of cereal. A bowl of something familiar. A bowl of 'We're going to be OK. At Post, we know what a full bowl can mean." Next, shots of the factory producing cereal are shown with overlaid text stating, "That's why we're keeping the lines running. Our employees

are now provided with masks while at work. The warehouse is delivering the breakfast you love on the family table." This is followed by shots of smiling workers and text that states, "None of us knows what the day will bring. But together, we can give it a good start." Then, the Post and Malt O Meal logos are shown with the wording below stating, "Feeding families for over 100 years."

Similarly, the Kraft-Heinz advertisement expresses the theme of "Safety" as a means of keeping US Americans safe by continuing production of their products. The commercial opens with a date – April 4, 2020 – and images of the outside of the Kraft-Heinz manufacturing plant followed by images of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and Heinz Ketchup being made and put into packages. Workers are wearing masks and using hand sanitizer. Some workers are making strong muscle signs and putting their thumbs up. While these images are shown, a female announcer says "Given the current situation, we are all affected by what is going on in America today. I was asking myself like what I could do. I feel that along with my colleagues I have been called to do what we can in this situation. I feel like I'm doing it for all the families in America who are not going anywhere, who are here. This is bigger than all of us but together we can get through this." The last image is of the African American woman who is speaking. The commercial fades to white then wording appears: "Showing up every day for our families. And yours. We got you America."

Conclusion

Based on the research in this study, it is concluded that food advertisements broadcast during the COVID-19 pandemic contained many themes with the overarching goal of providing comfort and solidarity to US Americans by using the main themes of "Unity," "Service," "Family/Friends," and "Safety" during a stressful time. The presence of these themes may initially be considered "feel-good" advertisements to remind customers of the companies' efforts during a difficult time. More likely, however, they are designed to create the image of deep family/friend like connections. In other words, from a psychological perspective, it is difficult for customers to abandon those who are serving in solidarity with them during a time of national crisis. The more these companies can convince customers of their loyalty, the greater the chances of building the post COVID-19 pandemic relationships that Balis considers "everything" to the survival of businesses. As she notes, the COVID-19 pandemic "has placed a new emphasis on relationships"

in a virtual sales environment where prior relationships must be maintained and capitalized on to "maintain revenue momentum" (Balis).

Balis goes on to note that "trust and integrity are fundamental" in marketing and that advertising is used to make promises to customers on which companies must deliver. The advertisements in this study reflect these ideas. To build successful, long-lasting relationships, companies, especially those that have a great number of competitors, must stand alongside of their customers during a national crisis. While it is true that many companies survived the pandemic without using thematic advertising as the food companies in this study did, it's not difficult to imagine that they used these same concepts on a smaller scale without the use and expense of mediated communication. For example, the neighborhood shop owner who put aside scarce products for regular customers during supply chain difficulties reflects the "Service" and "Unity" themes without national advertising. Similarly, this shop owner may have also worked to promote feelings of "Safety" and "Family/Friends" by providing regular customers with these products in way that mimics what a family member or friend would do. The national food advertisements in this study reflect these practices on a much large scale while presenting consumers with the illusion of the familiarity found in smaller merchants. Mull notes, the presence of these themes serves an additional purpose. She notes that COVID-19 pandemic advertisements point to "pandemic dystopia with a particularly American twist" that ultimately is designed as a means of "disastertising" a catastrophe and persuading customers that spending money is "an act of solidarity" designed to allow them to remain solvent during a national pandemic (Mull). Drawing on this concept, national food advertisers were looking to capitalize on the same support offered to local businesses during a national crisis by using themes to reflect solidarity in their advertisements. Due to the COVID-19 crisis and ensuing lockdown, these national food companies were able to draw on a familiarity usually reserved for local businesses by using themes which promoted feelings of solidarity when purchasing these foods.

The importance of identifying themes used in food advertising should not be underestimated. Identification of these themes not only allows, as Davis points out, a look into the "social life of food" but into American culture during a time of great challenge. As evidenced from this study, themes that mimic those of family and friends were plentiful in food advertising during the pandemic. These findings help identify the cultural expectations US Americans have from food manufacturers as well as the importance these products play in their lives during lockdown.

Furthermore, it gives media historians a look into promotional techniques used as companies worked to navigate a challenging business environment. The "Unity," "Service," and "Safety" themes reminded customers that the companies they buy food from are working hard to help keep them safe and provide delicious food for them while the "Family/Friends" theme provides a familiarity necessary for long-term loyalty to the establishments as well as positive feelings about the companies. Overall, it can be concluded that the themes present in COVID-19 pandemic food advertisements clearly exemplify companies' efforts to establish feelings of unity and family with their customers during an economically challenging time. Furthermore, the inclusion of the "Unity" and "Family/Friends" themes is a clear reflection of the ideas presented by Klein in her groundbreaking book. She points to legendary adman Bruce Barton's words, noting that advertising was created to help corporations find their souls. Klein also notes that though companies produce products, consumers buy brands, and these brands need to have an identity (6). Relating this to the current study, the themes found in COVID-19 pandemic food advertisements reflect this idea and indicate companies working to establish identities to their customers as friends and protectors as well as to "find their souls."

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Supermarket Culinary Magazine: A Telescope to Observe Portuguese Contemporary Food Culture[1]

CYNTHIA LUDERER AND EVELINE BAPTISTELLA

Whether through nature or culture, food reveals its multiple layers to human beings, and the senses of their bodies, tied to their memories, either induce or stop salivation for a new bite. The images and verbal calls are part of food consumption dynamics and provide different communicational mechanisms linked to social, economic, and political issues.

Food culture is exposed to a field with a "complex process of semiosis" (Parasecoli "Savoring Semiotics" 646), and supermarkets are great stages to study this stronghold. These companies buzz around food and develop strategies likely to move many wallets and stimulate appetites. They trigger a movement that resonates intensely in the cultural field. Thus, it is worth analyzing these sites to understand the critical period of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and its impact on food culture.

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From the *Semiotics of Culture,* it is possible to see that COVID-19 has promoted modifications both in the first reality, that is, the physical — biological sphere, and in the second reality, the sign universe that is ordered as language, composing the sphere of culture (Bystrina). In turn, the pandemic forced adherence to new habits. In Portugal, for example, supermarkets have had to develop or improve their online sales services, since the practice became frequent from the beginning of the pandemic. Even in 2021, this European country presented itself as one of the leaders in purchasing meals by delivery (Pinto).

Such changes do not occur by themselves, because culture transforms itself, given the movement of cultural texts that dialogue with the emergency scenarios brought about by the outbreak of COVID-19. Therefore, the media is one of the spheres in which new imaginaries unfold and consolidate, also impacting cultural identity (Hall). The isolation imposed by the virus clashed with the ideals linked to globalization and exposed the fragilities of the mundialization of capital. Since very few countries can consider themselves self — sufficient nowadays, the question arises: what would be the effects of such changes in the sphere of Portuguese popular food culture?

In this regard, this paper focuses on addressing a communication vehicle used as a marketing tool by the Portuguese supermarket Pingo Doce (PD), which, in 2018, was the second largest supermarket chain by number of stores in the country (Grupo Marktest). This company is affiliated with the 50th largest food distributor in the world, the Portuguese group Jerónimo Martins, which also operates in Colombia and Poland (Deloitte). The cooking magazine *Sabe Bem* (SB) is available at the checkouts of PD supermarkets for only 0.50€ (fifty cents). It is a customized publication, issued bi-monthly for ten years with a circulation of approximately 150,000 copies. On top of that, this type of media vehicle explicitly includes the brand of the company of which it is a part (Fischer).

This paper sought to consider cultural texts transformations in food culture in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic by analyzing the semiotic narratives presented in this magazine. The corpus includes the six editions issued in 2020 and the first three of 2021.[2] This process analyzes these nine editions' visual and language messages, the images, colors, shapes, angles, and examined the use of words and verb tenses, repetition of terms, and the semantic relations of signifiers

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[2] The PD supermarket website provides the digital versions of SB ten months after its printed publication. https://www.pingodoce.pt/pingodoce-institucional/revista-sabe-bem.

and meanings. The analysis of this series of signs and their relations was crucial to assess this magazine's topics and its communication strategies.

The chosen corpus, criteria, and a critical view are essential to grasp the underlying messages in the magazine's sign arrangements. This analysis highlighted the covers of the nine issues, their editor's letters, and the Mediterranean Diet (MD) topic, and the brand Juliana. MD is a concept SB promoted since its publication began, which gained further traction during the COVID-19 pandemic and the brand Juliana, which PD launched in late 2020, plays a particular role in promoting this diet.

SB demonstrates the engagement of issues that revolve around different propositions, which hover beyond the condition of food as a nutritional asset. The esteem for the 10th principle of the MD outlined in the editions of the magazine, setting the table as a social place, which displays the appreciation of family within the Portuguese culture, suggests other implicit values of the Portuguese culture, inherent to its semiosphere. In this regard, the SB 2020 Christmas edition (see Fig.1) demonstrates the adaptations in food rituals in the face of the pandemic. As a predominantly Catholic country, with gregarious habits, the Portuguese were restrained from circulating and organizing celebrations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[3]

In this issue, the publisher's letter consoles the reader for having to change the routine and stresses the importance of keeping joy and sharing at the table, offering recipes "from the old faithful friend first PD codfish" to spread the magic of Christmas. More than that, it is in this issue that the PD brand reformulates its communicative strategy related to the dissemination of MD. Based on the repercussions of the pandemic, this food model becomes linked to the concept of *portugality* and is represented by a new brand: Juliana, Portuguese Mediterranean Diet.

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[3] In terms of political intervention, with the due approval from the Council of Ministers, the government has relied on the state of emergency, the state of calamity, the state of contingency situation, or the state of alert to direct population control, governing each situation according to the severity of the COVID-19 cases. At the moment, it is already planned to maintain the state of alert until March 22, 2022 (Vieira de Almeida).

Figure 1. *Sabe Bem* 58th issue cover

Particularly, this article points to a reconfiguration in the cultural text of this communicational support, which starts to amplify nationalist discourses and summons consumers to a new behavioral program, connecting consumption to a patriotic spirit. More specifically, this magazine presents itself as a telescope to closely observe the current advertising policies of a company, which has a relevant influence in the Portuguese public sphere, as it stands out as the largest enterprise regarding food in the country, in a time of fragility, due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19.

The Food Semiosphere

According to Fabio Parasecoli, the act of eating may even be perceived, at first glance, as a simple biological mechanism connected to the maintenance of existence. However, as the author argues, eating has a very intense and complex emotional meaning, precisely because it is a crucial element for survival (*Bite Me* 24). The outlines of such a connection are visible in numerous areas of life and form "an arena where cultural, social, and political struggles find visible expression" (72).

Food and eating are deeply embedded in our subjectivity and go far beyond biology. These are markers of social distinction (Bourdieu) and expressions of identity and belonging that change over time (Sobral, *Nacionalismo, Culinária e*

classe). This paper seeks to analyze the SB magazine and its contents through the semiotics of culture, mainly based on the concepts of the Russian Iúri Lotman (*La Semiosfera I*). Semiotics unfolds in different theoretical lines: the French school, linked to Saussure, focuses on linguistics, while the North American school, linked to signs, is supported by Peirce and, in turn, the Russian semiotics origin focuses on text and culture (Peres 150-1).

This semiotics argues that culture is a non-genetic memory, a behavior program in which events become knowledge and are passed on from generation to generation, shaping a fabric forged by a semiotic continuum (Velho 253). For Lotman (La Semiosfera I), there are no isolated cultural systems. They only work when immersed in this continuum, which Lotman called the semiosphere – an analogy to the concept of biosphere – and which consists of several types of semiotic organizations. This mechanism relies on the suggestion that culture is a large text, a concept that emerges from Lotman's dialogue with Information Theory and Cybernetics (Machado 32). Thereby, there is a system in which the information of social reality is codified and organized into texts that will become part of the culture, operating as a program that regulates the behavior of social groups. According to Lotman, "in the general system of culture, texts have at least two primary functions: the adequate conveyance of meanings and the creation of new meanings" (*La Semiosfera I* 65).

Simply put, everyday life events are organized in texts, which are systems of signs, and absorbed by the non – genetic memory of social groups in the form of codes that materialize through cultural manifestations. This mechanism is dynamic and depends on the relationship between different cultural texts, such as gastronomy, fashion, religion, and architecture. That is why culture is constantly changing to renew habits and practices over time.

Lotman (*La Semiosfera I*) explains that this complex game is played precisely within the so-called semiosphere, an environment that provides appropriate conditions for semiosis. Codes, languages, and, ultimately, cultural texts interact in the semiosphere. Thus, food would be a specific semiosphere, bringing together the cultural texts related to this area (Jacob 4). They do not exist in an isolated and static way because they relate to each other and create new cultural structures. The concept of translation of tradition, another crucial point in the semiotics of culture, fits into this principle:

> The translation of tradition can thus be perceived as an encounter between
> different cultures from which cultural codes emerge to work as programs

for further developments. That means that cultural codes generate non –
hereditary memory, as Lotman perceived it, responsible for formatting the
semiotic systems of culture. (Machado 30)

Each cultural text holds a less penetrable core in the semiosphere, which houses its
most stable elements. However, in its edges, the text has a more fluid and open
structure, simultaneously contaminating and being contaminated by other cultural
texts. The intensity of semiosis is greater there, generating updates from the contact
with the edges of other semiospheres. This dynamic shapes the cultural text's
reconfiguration process, completed through the contact between core and edges.
When it comes to food, according to Helena Jacob, we have a cultural fabric made
up of all the texts ever produced about food and cooking, because "The
communication links that create new texts are structured in their connection, in a
continuous semiosis and recoding process inherent to any cultural system" (4).

Whether in the field of food or others, what allows the new texts to coexist are
the different densities between the semiosphere's components, the elements of
innovation, and those that are part of its founding core, of it's self-description. For
Lotman, such dynamic unfolds within a polar structure, which underlies the concept
of explosion. In his view (*Cultura y Explosión* 245), "the dynamic processes in
culture are built as a kind of pendulum oscillations between the state of explosion
and the state of organization, which happens in gradual processes" and, with this,
they ensure continuity, while the explosive ones are responsible for innovation.

Based on this principle, one can infer that the COVID-19 pandemic and its
global outbreak represents a moment of explosion. This is a concept that Ana Paula
Velho (256) calls a "sudden acceleration" that will trigger explosions of new
cultural texts. The virus outbreak introduces a new semiosphere that will expand
into large shock waves and contaminate other semiospheres – like he PD
supermarket and its communication strategies – in the fabric of contemporary
culture, including food.

The information emerging from the physical- biological context is codified in
new cultural texts transforming the habits and rituals related to eating. The food
semiosphere and its texts, based on communion and sharing at the table, are now
related to health risk concepts. The celebration of Christmas, mentioned above, was
an example, as well as the creation of the Portuguese-style MD, which adds a
nationalistic repertoire to the plot of its health-related parameters.

The act of eating is now under the shadow of caution and fear, especially in
light of the cultural texts about the coronavirus' survival on surfaces and the

potential for contamination (Silva et al. *"Condutas sanitárias"*). The fear of such contamination hit hard on the relationship with food, creating routines that became hallmarks of the outset of the pandemic, such as sanitizing all groceries before putting them away.

The popular food culture was also directly affected by the quarantines adopted worldwide and the consequent mobility limitation. For instance, all public places of food socialization, such as bars, restaurants, food trucks, and community kitchens, were closed indefinitely. Along with the confinement requirement, that intensified the need to prepare food within the domestic space generating widespread phenomena, such as the so- called "*pãodemia*," (breademic) pun coined in Brazil and Portugal to address the fever of bread production at home (Silva et al. "DELIquarantine").

These events also touch and move the borders of the supermarkets' semiosphere, leading to new cultural texts related to the act of buying food. It is worth remembering that, as Miller (33) pointed out, notions of affection and sacrifice shape the exercise of consumption in supermarkets. In such a scenario, the following analysis focuses on SB magazine as a privileged semiosphere to understand the impact of COVID-19 and its ramifications on popular food cultures as its narratives configure and reconfigure cultural texts that will be part of culture's non-genetic memory and introduce new behavioral programs.

Sabe Bem and the Making of Being Portuguese

The promotions featured in customized supermarket magazines are a powerful tool to recognize the food market of a particular culture and a particular space/time. However, this analysis reveals other messages in these vehicles, as relevant as the commodities highlighted by the marketing team, which offer clues to understand different discourses on food that drive the population to ingest and digest new ideas and trends.

Among the different sections of that magazine, the covers represent an iconic object of study (Luderer & Carvalho). In each issue, the cover displays different content, which, through detailed image and graphic font layouts, summon the reader to spark their curiosity and whet their appetite enough to purchase the new issue and new products. Visually and verbally, the cover stands out for concisely expressing the editor's promise of what the reader will find in the magazine (Spiker).

The narrative in the editor's letter is another crucial section, as it sediments the narrator's intention and guides the audience to perceive the highlights of the new issue. Moreover, it is a space that seeks to connect the editor and the reader (Ali 204). Based on the importance of these two sections, as axes of each issue, they will be analyzed in greater depth because they represent the gateway to reflect on the corpus selected for this work.

From the first editions, the covers of SB have the following layout: at the top the title, underlined by its slogan, *Faz Bem* (is good for you); at the bottom, on the left, the drawing of an olive tree, with the caption *Sabores Mediterrânicos* (Mediterranean flavors) and, on the right, the PD supermarket logo. The first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, was also the year of the PD's 40th anniversary celebrations. As a result, the messages disseminated at the bottom of SB added further information: throughout this year, the caption "*40 anos*" (40 years) was added to the PD logo; and, as of the last 2020 edition, the olive tree and its caption were replaced by the Juliana logo (see Fig. 2), and the caption "*Dieta Mediterrânica à Portuguesa*" (Portuguese style Mediterranean diet).

Figure 2. Juliana's design (https://juliana.pingodoce.pt/)

Juliana is introduced as a new PD brand and refers to promoting a model of diet tied to the MD among the Portuguese. According to Duarte Vilaça[4], responsible for the agency behind the Juliana communication project, the idea was on the agenda before the pandemic. Through a popular expression – casting a stone in the pond –

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[4] Duarte Vilaça is the head of the Born agency, and he was interviewed over the phone on August 23, 2021.

he emphasized the project gained relevance with the arrival of COVID-19, which he considered as an irreversible movement.

As Vilaça explains,[5] "structurally, MD has a great commitment to sustainability, to health, and to Portuguese identity and culture" and one of the bets of the Jerónimo Martins Group is to promote it. The company had already drawn up a plan to launch a book with recipes to promote MD, including attention to soups, and this nutritional model gained relevance in the face of the widespread crisis surrounding the pandemic. The project was expanded to the point where they organized a larger plan: the launch of the new Juliana brand. After all, Vilaça said "everyone was talking about food sovereignty, about the food distribution chains," in other words, that "it was necessary for each country to ensure its local production." Added to this, MD gives people the opportunity to make "miracles with very little matter, the matter that exists next to our homes, in the backyard, very close to us." An important complement to what Vilaça said is that, according to Pedro Graça (2020), soup is an iconic dish in Portugal and has a great expression that is not seen in other European regions. In other words, what we can see is that the supermarket chain takes advantage of this moment of fragility to reinforce its nationalist repertoires, emphasizing the idea of belonging through consumption.

According to José Manuel Sobral, the valorization of national cuisines is a phenomenon interpreted as a reaction against the "threats of homogenization inherent in globalization" (*O Revivalismo da Alimentação* 200). On the other hand, "the identification of food and cuisine as heritage, tradition, authenticity, in short, as culture" becomes a commodity for the world economy (202).

Juliana's colorful design (see Fig. 2), added from issue 58 (November – December 2020), suggests several messages referring to the MD. Each letter in the name is associated to different signs related to the foods promoted in this diet. There are waves and fish, vegetables, fruits and legumes, a spoon — referring to soup — and a heart in the center — representing the love for food and socializing at the table at mealtime. The caption added to the brand's name highlights the proposal's bond with the Portuguese people: *Dieta Mediterrânica à Portuguesa* (Portuguese style Mediterranean Diet).

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[5] The Vilaça presentation was held in the III Food and Sustainability Seminar, promoted on October 14, 2021, by Polobs / CECS, from University of Minho. https://www.cecs.uminho.pt/en/agenda-2030-e-a-alimentacao-um-sabor-com-gosto-de-cultura.

Bonded to a healthy diet paradigm, the MD was recognized by UNESCO in 2013 as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and Portugal, represented by the city of Tavira, became one of the seven countries for its Safeguarding (UNESCO; Romano). The information was disclosed in the 17th edition of SB (January February 2014), when the magazine's spokesperson explained the proximity of the PD brand to this food proposal:

> Aware of the medium and long-term advantages to health, Pingo Doce follows this same approach when developing its own-brand products. It chooses the most genuine and least refined ingredients to ensure that the products are as natural as possible, using as few additives as possible. That also applies to the choice of fats, preferring olive or sunflower oil and more whole wheat flours, for example. (8)

The SB nutrition team has showcased the MD since the beginning. As of issue 36 (March- April 2017), it includes a column signed by the Portuguese Directorate General of Health (DGS) to reinforce the repertoire on this diet in the magazine.[6] The discourses of health experts underline the messages about the quality of the MD and, due to the pandemic scenario and the Portuguese's growing interest in health- related topics (see Fig. 3), Juliana's project became an opportunity to engage the public.

The communication contract, as proposed by Patrick Charaudeau (67), allows the inference that these conditions around the MD and the health experts provided a favorable communicational "frame of reference" for the Juliana project to engage the public. Such a tool also enables the narrator — the various actors linked to the media production — to keep the communication contract active with its readers (its recipients).

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[6] The column was missing from editions 54 to 57 (March to October 2020), the time frame of DGS's first efforts to address the problems arising from the pandemic.
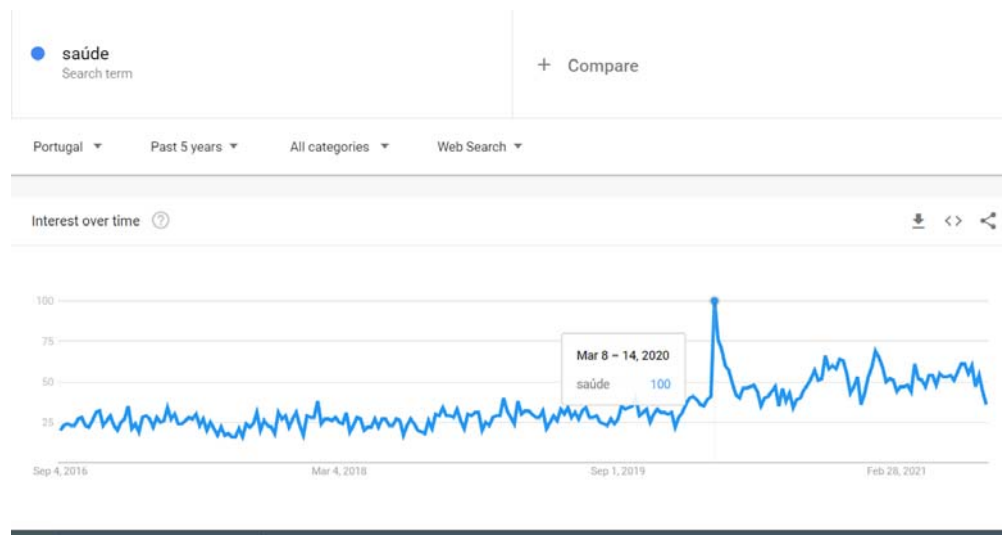
Figure 3. Google Trends search for the keyword Health, narrowed to Portugal, in the last five years, on August 30, 2021 (https://trends.google.pt/trends/explore?date=today%205–y&geo=PT&q=sa%C3%BAde)

It is worth noting that "the answer comes later, the contract is always held late compared to the arrangements of the convocation" (Prado 67) when the public has already provided the speeches. Therefore, the device, the Juliana project, plays a significant role because:

> The device seeks to draw attention, to promote customer retention, to encourage the proactive consumer's behavior as a listener, as a follower of consumer values, as a resonator, as a consumer. The narrator, to stand out, develops the text to appeal, to challenge a narrative loaded with meanings related to the everyday world. To be followed, the narrator creates contexts based on his authority as an expert. (Prado 67)

There is no frame of reference for the social community's apparent interest in the topic of health, endorsed by the echoes of experts dictating the benefits of the MD. Even if there were, the narrator would only confirm if his convocations were adequate to maintain a communication contract with the public vis a vis the messages promoted by Juliana after the public received the project.

This movement is in line with the famous expression used by the head of the Born agency, for when confronted with the pandemic, Juliana has become a stone cast in the pond in becoming relevant as a text, updating the MD to establish a food

culture centered on local production. In issue 59 (January February 2020), the message displayed in a box headlined "A diet that celebrates being Portuguese" suggests this motto:

> The Portuguese style MD is a promoter of our culture and identity as a people. With Juliana, we want to bring the Portuguese closer to this food pattern/lifestyle and renew our commitment to promoting its benefits, reviving the ancient secrets in it and the roots of Portugal. With Juliana, we want to bring the Portuguese closer to this food pattern/lifestyle and renew our commitment to promoting its benefits, reviving the ancient secrets and the roots of being Portuguese. (9)

Hence, it is worth mentioning that the Portuguese style MD is a new cultural text created by the Jerónimo Martins marketing channels, and there is no record of a Portuguese version of the MD. This new designation is part of a narrative established to combine the ideals of health and sustainability, long connected by the publication to the MD, with the values of being Portuguese and belonging. This storyline grows stronger and stronger in the magazine as the pandemic progresses.

Lotman (*La Semiosfera I* 54), when dealing with the communicative process of the text, argues that, as part of collective memory, it grows richer, gets updated, or may even have parts forgotten. Such mutations are evident in this renewed movement of the MD, characterized as a translation of the tradition. The analyses confirm this phenomenon, which includes being Portuguese in the cultural text of the MD.

The covers of issues 53 (January/February 2020) and 54 (March/April 2020)[7] focus on seasonality: they feature, respectively, recipes for winter and Easter highlights. Although both publications highlight the 40th anniversary of the PD supermarket chain, issue 54 is a commemorative edition. The so — called symbols of Portugal, like the colors of the national flag, the reference to typical recipes, and their connection to specific regions in the country, along with the inclusion of objects tied to local culture, are ignored on cover 53. On cover 54, the photo recipe is for "*minifolares com ovo de codorniz*" (puff pastry with quail eggs), a dish

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[7] Magazines, especially hard copy, work with a somewhat out-of-sync schedule with the factual events. Thus, SB only penetrates the semiosphere of the pandemic from issue 55 (May/June 2020) onward.

associated with Portuguese folklore[8]. To recognize such an association, one must own the repertoire of Portuguese gastronomic culture. With pastel tones and contemporary tableware, its imagery does not provide the same perception that more apparent symbols, such as the colors of the national flag or typical Portuguese tableware, would provide.

Issue 55 (May/June 2020) sets the pandemic cultural context into play. Halfway through the first quarantine period, the magazine was made available for free and only digitally. On the cover, the non-verbal elements highlight Portugal, with the colors of the Portuguese flag in the visual arrangement. The cover photo highlights the choice for symbols related to the regional paradigm: a fish-based recipe, included in the magazine as "*Dourada nacional no forno com escabeche e cenoura*" (roasted national sea bream with marinated carrot). The verbal statements complete the Portuguese construction with the following messages: "*Portugal à sua mesa*" (Portugal at your table) and "*Receitas rápidas e económicas com os melhores produtos nacionais*" (Quick and economical recipes with the best national products). This construction is significant because the publication does not often use red and green on the cover to evoke the Portuguese flag.

The design also suggests Portugal, as there are traces of green and red on the cover, underlining the slogan "*Portugal à sua mesa*" (Portugal at your table). The edition's page numbers also highlight these colors. Both initiatives become part of the 2021 issues when there is an opportunity to promote the magazine as a collection of recipes and content relating to the cuisine of the country's six regions.

Apart from the Christmas issue (n. 58, November/December 2020), which introduces Juliana to the reader and keeps the golden tone in focus (see Fig. 1), the combination of red and green frequently appears on the covers following issue 55 (see Fig. 4). In the summer issue (n. 56, July/August 2020), the colors of Portugal predominate in the composition of the refreshing fruit lollipops. In the following one (n. 57, September/October 2020), these colors materialize in the magazine's title and the boxes with messages describing the issue's promotions. The next three (numbers 59, 60, and 61), all referring to the first half of 2021, are featured as special issues for promoting a collection of recipes from different parts of the country and outline the names of each region with two dashes, in green and red (see Fig. 5).

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[8] The folar with quail egg is a traditional Easter dish in Portugal. The recipe links to a legend that involves the devotion to Santa Catarina and symbolizes reconciliation and forgiveness.

Figure 4. *Sabe Bem* 55th issue cover

Figure 5. *Sabe Bem* 59th issue cover

The editor's letters frequently include a reference to health in their narratives. Issue 59 (3) stresses the "*promoção da saúde pela alimentação*," (promotion of health through food) and Juliana reinforces this commitment. Issue 61 (3) stresses PD's interest "*em promover a saúde através de uma boa alimentação*," (in promoting health through good nutrition). It explains that, among the 2500 recipes developed by the nutrition team the magazine has published in its ten years, almost half of them are in line with the MD.

The MD is a significant vehicle for the health flagship, but it also stands for tradition, a dominant motto in the editor's letter, an essential topic for the PD. This noun is often used in the body of the magazine, and its radical – tradition and traditional, and their plural forms are mentioned twenty-three times in the hundred pages of the special edition dedicated to the 40th anniversary of the PD brand (n.54, January/February 2020).

The covers and the editor's letter examined endorse the premise of using this concept. "*O sabor da tradição*" (the taste of tradition) is announced on the covers of the 54th and 58th editions, and "*viagem pelos grandes clássicos*" (a journey through the great classics) and "*viagem pela gastronomia típica*" (a journey through local cuisine) on the 59th and 60th covers. The editor's letters also use this word, among others, to evoke a sense of origin and past. Moreover, these mnemonic convocations are often included in a context that praises belonging to the Portuguese universe – some excerpts, taken from the editor's letter in Table 1, show this link.

Looking at the editorials, issue 55 (May/June 2020) stands out because it represents a change in the magazine's targeting mode. It featured two messages: the editor's letter and a letter signed by PD's sales director titled "*compre o que é português*" (buy what is Portuguese). The editor's letter, featuring in every issue, underlines the cultural changes underway as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> In the month we celebrate *Sabe Bem*'s ninth anniversary, we have a new normal in-store, very demanding and with enormous challenges at all levels. We know that nothing will be as it was before, and we also know that it is vital to look ahead and adapt. (2)

The note shows a change in behavior caused by the pandemic. Its message states that the magazine has become more valuable in the lockdown, as it helps the reader organize the daily meals, emphasizing that this would be a time when one "*preciso cozinhar*" (has to cook).

n.53	(…) reviving classic tastes of typical Portuguese cuisine)
n.54	(…) we share <u>our history</u> with Portugal and with the Portuguese (…) the gastronomic diversity, which is one of our country's most significant <u>legacies</u> and respecting traditions we have always tried to offer the best to a more demanding Portugal; (…) from the most <u>traditional</u> recipes to the <u>typical</u> sweets you will be able to cook with your family; good moments to celebrate with Portugal and the Portuguese
n.55	(…) we invite you on a journey, from home, through 100% national and <u>authentic</u> flavors (…) taste the <u>typical</u> delicacies of our Portugal (…) – (editor's letter);
	We have identified the Portuguese products most affected by this downturn, and we are buying them so that those who work the land, raise animals, and feed the country will not be short of orders. Furthermore, we will give greater visibility to the Portuguese quality products in our stores (...) We invite you to join forces with us by buying what is Portuguese. – (letter from the sales director)
n.56	(...) for 40 years, we have been passionate about good ingredients, good tastes, and good recipes, and we will continue to share this passion with you
n.57	(…) dedication to bringing <u>authentic</u> food; (…) <u>genuine</u>, nutritious, and balanced <u>flavors</u>. Balance is, in fact, one of the keywords of the Mediterranean Diet, a dietary pattern that PD has promoted and advocates for more than a decade (…). For PD, it feels good to serve Portugal and help to make your table a better place (…)
n.58	We know that the holidays will not be the same as we will have to postpone all the hugs and cuddles, but one thing is for sure: the table will have plenty of <u>traditional</u> recipes and delicacies of the season. Courses and desserts with the special touch and seasoning of grandma, dad or mom, and other relatives, <u>passed on from generation to generation</u> (…); (…) the table must have the old and faithful friend codfish) (…) to delight the Portuguese in <u>traditional</u> recipes (…); (…) Juliana's launch, a PD tribute to the Portuguese style MD, the ancient knowledge (…) A way to <u>keep heritage alive</u> (…); <u>traditional dishes</u> prepared with the utmost rigor (…)
n. 59	SB celebrates its 10th anniversary in the best possible way: with a journey through the regions and flavors of Portugal. (…) let us discover the secrets of recipes, ingredients, protagonists, and traditions that make Portuguese gastronomy a worldwide reference (….) A decade ago, when the magazine project started, the <u>main focus</u> was promoting health through food. Ten years later (...) it has been reinforced with the launch of the Juliana project, a concept that represents the celebration of Portuguese style MD. (…) we adhere to the principles of the diet classified as <u>World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity</u> by UNESCO) (…) The Portuguese are well aware of the importance of this conviviality, and our identity (…) Get ready to be surprised by the <u>traditions</u>, stories,

	and secrets behind some of the Portuguese cuisine's most famous dishes and products.
n. 60	(…) we have never lost the drive to discover or rediscover the best of what we have in Portugal, for example, browsing the flavors of our gastronomy through the most <u>authentic</u> Portuguese ingredients) (…) Our journey through the regions and the flavors of Portugal (…) We stopped to listen to a proud woman from the Alentejo, a great lady in the Portuguese cuisine, Maria de Lourdes Modesto[9] (...) Through the passion for the best Portugal has (...) we always count on the best Portuguese products the PD has been bringing to our homes and whose production it supports (...) it is a constant recognition to national producers (...) we don't want Portuguese families to lack taste and joy (...) the <u>feeling of tradition</u> and celebration cannot be forgotten (...) come with us on this surprising journey through the <u>traditions of Portugal</u>.
n.61	At PD, we have been passionate about food, and about everything related to the good Portuguese table, for over 40 years; (...) promoting health through food by helping Portuguese families; (...) each issue brings a Special devoted to the gastronomic traditions of a region of Portugal.

Table 1. Most highlighted terms in the editor's letter that convoke the context of tradition (our emphasis).

The second letter of the issue had a picture of the author and a logo with the sentence "consigo damos força a Portugal" (with you, we make Portugal stronger). This logo, which refers to the coat of arms in the center of the Portuguese flag and has the same hues as the Portuguese national symbol (i.e., green, red, and golden yellow) invites the reader/consumer to engage in citizenship exalting Portugal. The article's title is also emblematic: "compre o que é português" (buy what is Portuguese) (SB 55 3), and its content is convocation to consumption as a means of solidarity with one's compatriots.

> For 40 years, Pingo Doce has joined its strength to the strength of national production. Still, today, when national production needs more support than ever, we are reinforcing our commitment. We have identified the Portuguese products most affected by this downturn, and we are buying them so that those who work the land, raise animals, and feed the country will not be short of orders. (3)

Being Portuguese as a marketing campaign-related approach aimed at selling through a nationalistic appeal (Sousa) makes this issue peculiar. Besides this second letter, this issue has other highlighted visual and language messages replicated in the subsequent editions.

Thus, one can trace a translation process within the semiosphere of SB magazine starting in issue 55. The magazine narrative had already used the verbal sign "tradition" before. As Sobral says (*O revivalismo da alimentação*), "In Portugal in recent decades, there has been a persistent effort to preserve and defend culinary practices understood as traditionals" (199). However, after the health crisis, which unfolds in an economic and social crisis, the magazine explores the noun with new meanings, linked to a sense of belonging beyond the bounds of the family, another constant sign in the magazine's texts. Stuart Hall (*A identidade cultural)* states that national culture is a discourse: the narrative of a nation is constructed and reconstructed from history, literature, media and popular culture. Also, according to the author, there are times when national cultures are tempted to seek a past time, in which the nation would have lived some kind of golden age.

Crises, such as the one caused by COVID-19, fit into this context. Traditional Portuguese recipes and rituals previously were about private affection, tied to memories and shared moments with those close to us. Updating this cultural text, the core of this semiosphere is crossed by discourses linked to a tradition personified by the appreciation of what is Portuguese, as a means of supporting food producers, calling for a new behavioral program: the consumption of local products to sustain and support Portuguese workers, empowering the local economy. It is worth noting that, even though sustainability topics cut across and essentially justify local consumption, in the SB, this practice relates almost entirely to the idea that this type of consumption establishes a relationship of solidarity and unity.

The previous editions also included international food products as a distinctive feature of the supermarket chain and described such products as delicacies. Issue 53, for example, includes a piece about the excellence of the PD chain's own — brand chocolate, noting that the bars are "feitos a partir do melhor cacao produzido no Gana e na Costa do Marfim" (made from the best cocoa produced in Ghana and Ivory Coast) (61). Foreign foods also feature in number 54 as signs of sophistication and quality. Cod from Norway, exotic fruits from tropical countries, and buffalo milk *burrata* from southern Italy are among the delicacies PD proposes to its customers.

The 55th issue is thus a landmark turning point. It makes intense use of local producers' images and their comments about how important the commercial relationship with the supermarket is for keeping their businesses afloat. Messages

on several pages highlight the discourses related to empowering the country through the consumption of regional products.

For instance, cooperative members join under the following rhetoric: "Purchasing of qualified regional products helps develop the country's most disadvantaged and depopulated regions. Supporting the production of native cattle breeds is a commitment on behalf of the national interest" (SB 55 7). Further on, the following text is linked to a horticulturist, pictured inside a greenhouse, surrounded by what is supposed to be his children: "Today, and more than ever, Pingo Doce has been fundamental for selling his products. The last weeks showed just that when the doors to the export market were practically closed, and the national market was essential for the survival of its producers, selling a substantial part of the domestic production. As for Beirabaga, we have much to be thankful for!" (SB 55 76).

In issue 56, the human element is the employees of the PD, who feature duly equipped with masks, talking about the sanitary procedures adopted by the company to avoid contamination. In the same issue, the magazine's visual identity includes the logo "National product," crossed by green and red lines, and the slogan "with you we make Portugal stronger." The signs materialized in the union of the colors green and red convoke the reader to the patriotic spirit and to recognize, rediscover and value the local products, as the use of two dashes in these colors, which underline the words in the context of the Portuguese universe. Olive oil, Angus beef, eggs, trout, raspberries, and cherries are some examples highlighted in issue 55 (May/June 2020). It reinforces the appeal to a sense of belonging to the nation through memory, phrases using the pronoun *we*, and even slogans linked to popular culture.

A publicized promotion of the PD own brand of olive oils, for example, describes them as "Surely a tradition of the Portuguese table" (10). The word "Portuguese" is underlined with the two dashes. This message builds an appeal to being Portuguese because this phrase, immersed in Portuguese culture, refers to the chorus of one of the most popular songs in the country: "*Uma casa portuguesa*" (A Portuguese house), sung by the fado singer Amália Rodrigues. It is worth noting that these texts – the chorus and the fado singer – became popular during the Estado Novo, the political period between 1933 and 1974 when a dictatorial regime governed Portugal under the rule of Salazar. Drawing on Vitor Sousa (2017), one can infer that messages like these, linked "at the service of an alleged sense of 'being Portuguese'" (116), trigger nationalist rhetoric.

This olive oil advertisement also includes the phrases "our family of olive oils" and "National Product," also highlighted in green and red; and then three cooking recipes, highlighting the targeted ingredient: the PD branded olive oil in these two colors. "The best of Portugal" is another motto that stands out on that page, as well as some boxes related to the advertised products, where one can see the image and texts that suggest the voice of producers or experts, endorsing the quality of Portuguese products. These messages demonstrate how PD supports them.

The use of the green and red outlines, which highlight or underline the terms linked to the Portuguese universe inside the magazine, are clarified in issue 56 (11): "In this issue, you can find a variety of recipes whose protagonists are national products, identified with the icon (drawing of the dashes), because together we make what is Portuguese stronger." This information, footnoted, is on a page that contains the logo with the coat of arms with the message "with you we make Portugal stronger," mentioned above, along with four pictures, stating: the best of Portuguese tradition; the best of our butcher's shop; the best of our fishmonger's shop; the best of our fruits and vegetables. The phrases using the pronoun "we" endorse the reader's belonging to the country's context and its tradition and summons the reader to realize that the supermarket, and its logistical divisions around food, are part of this scenario.

These interlocutions of the magazine, which contribute to activate the consumption of national products, are in line with the 52% of the Portuguese surveyed at the beginning of the pandemic who said that "the consumption of national products is a duty" and 29% consider it a "patriotic act", respectively 7% and 2% more compared to the previous year's survey (Miguel). Among the reasons listed for consuming Portuguese products, 82% claimed to promote job creation, 62% for promoting economic development, 57% motivated by the superior quality of the products, and only 9% considered it a way to limit the environmental impact (Observador 19). This movement is further emphasized by the words of the president of Portugal Foods, who states that the disruption of supply chains at the beginning of the pandemic contributed to the focus on the "made in Portugal" products and that the emotional value of the local supplies is now being "transformed into economic value for companies" (Souza).

Conclusion

Aiming at analyzing which narratives linked to food culture the SB cooking magazine presented during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study concludes that the health crisis contaminated the discourses of this publication, establishing a new cultural text within the Portuguese food semiosphere. The use of signs that invoke Portugal was proof of this conclusion. The colors green and red were explicitly articulated in the narratives to link the reader and the national flag. Besides these colors, the messages praised and promoted Portuguese producers and the attributes of regional merchandise. However, it is worth emphasizing that these messages are not just about food quality but also relate to a potential citizenship action through consuming these goods.

One can also notice an updating of the SB magazine's semiosphere, from the translation of tradition into the cultural text of the MD, which is now referred to as being "Portuguese style." The Juliana brand, and its composition of signs, which endorse this food proposal, reinforces SB's discourses around a convocation to being Portuguese.

By taking the above points into consideration, the magazine unfolded food – a basic necessity item – into signs of union, solidarity, patriotism, belonging, organizing a semiosphere, supported by narratives, which retain similarities with the elements present in nationalist discourses promoted by totalitarian governments. This semiotic composition places the enunciator in the condition of a father, the one who guides and protects those who inhabit his semiosphere. Even though the text is located in a capitalist paradigm, it makes sense to be alert to a model in which a commercial enterprise assumes this position. Taking into account the relevant role that the food universe occupies for society, it is fair to reflect on the effects of this construction of values, since discourses that follow this line can flow towards intolerance postures, especially in a pandemic moment, when food sovereignty proved to be a fragility.

In this sense, it is important to be aware of other configurations that go along with these discourses, which deserve to be explored in new investigations: one linked to the domain of the business market and the other to that of politics. In these two semiospheres, one can note significant updates, on one hand, the advance of foreign supermarket groups in the country; on the other hand, there is the rise of

political groups affiliated with conservative agendas[9]. These two cultural texts, that meet and interact, reveal a fertile environment for the expansion of the spirit of *Portugality* and, in extreme cases, of attitudes of intolerance.

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[9] In the 2022 elections, amid a spike in the contamination of the Omicrom variant, the far-right Chega (Enough) party, which spells out values of intolerance, rose from one to 12 seats in parliament.

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It Just Was not the Same

ALLYCIA TRAN

From first glance, anyone can see that I am Asian. Specifically, I am Vietnamese. Growing up people always assumed that I was Cambodian or Filipino because of my darker skin. It bothered me a lot because they would laugh when I told them I was Vietnamese and accuse me of lying or being adopted. This then resulted in me shying away from my culture because of the way others spoke to me. It was easy for me to do this – a little bit too easy. I grew up in a nondiverse community and moved to an even more nondiverse community around the age of fifteen. I was around so many white people that I tried my hardest to blend in with them and act as if I was not different at all. I believe it worked and I truly tried my hardest to not engage with my cultural roots. This continued until probably the tenth grade when I realized that I come from a different background than my white friends and started to recognize my cultural identity.

I love Vietnamese food. I always have and I always will. Growing up, I ate a lot of it, but I never brought it to school or asked my friends to come over to try it because as I have stated, I shielded my culture. For special occasions, my family and I would always go to this amazing restaurant in Minneapolis called Pho 79. They served great and authentic Vietnamese cuisine. I loved it a lot because there were many people from different backgrounds there all the time. It made me feel safe, included, and not afraid to enjoy Vietnamese food because there was no judgment from other people.

We went to the restaurant last summer and it was very different from what it was the year before. We decided to go eat at that restaurant because it was my dad's birthday, and we always do something special for birthdays. When we got there, a sign was posted up on the door, "Masks required at all times unless eating. Maximum capacity: 20 people." This surprised me because before the pandemic, there would be approximately 60-70 people in there and it would be so lively. When I walked in, it was a ghost town. There was one other family seated with their masks on in the corner of the restaurant waiting for their food in silence. We were seated on the other side of the room, furthest away from the other family. Many tables were empty and it looked like the staff had closed off a section of the restaurant

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because of the lack of business. Every ten minutes, I would see a food delivery person come in and grab food that was packaged on the counter. That was it though; it was my family, the other family, and the workers.

The beef pho I had tasted the same, but it was not the same because the environment was so empty and to me, it was unfulfilling. I was so conditioned to the place being full of different people enjoying Vietnamese food with me, but in this case, there was not anybody near us. The quietness ached and while it is good to enjoy quietness sometimes, in this restaurant, it was not the dynamic I was used to. My family and I had finished our meals in about forty-five minutes which was surprising because, in the past, we would spend up to two hours chatting away among ourselves and with strangers in the restaurant. It just was not the same.

COVID-19 has changed our lives forever, especially in the food industry. Pho 79 was a restaurant many people tried if they were interested in Vietnamese cuisine and environment but because of the fear of the pandemic, people do not go out as much. This concerns me because this may lead to people not being as interested in trying new foods from different cultures and food is a very important aspect of one's culture. Sitting in a packed restaurant filled with talkative strangers is not something we experience anymore. For me, Pho 79 reflected my culture because of the food, environment, people, and memories created.

Vietnamese food is something that I have enjoyed my entire life, and it is one of the many reasons why I have come to accept myself for who I am. This year, I am a sophomore in college, and I want to be able to take my roommates, who come from a background different from mine, to a restaurant that has my cultural identity embedded into it. I want to show my roommates a part of who I am. It is difficult now though, and the pandemic has changed the way we eat. We often do not go out to eat because of the risks of the pandemic. Most of the time, we are eating fast and easy meals at our apartment or grabbing fast food when we decide that it is time to treat ourselves.

This experience has caused me to reflect on several questions. How will people know how to socialize from now on? How will we be able to share our love for food with strangers in restaurants? How will people understand someone's culture without trying their food? Will people ever get the opportunity to try new cuisines? How will one experience an authentic restaurant and setting? How will I be able to show my roommates my cultural identity that I have grown to accept and appreciate? For myself, I plan to take a step deeper into my culture and learn how to cook great Vietnamese food to share aspects of my culture with others.

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

TARA J. SCHUWERK

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).
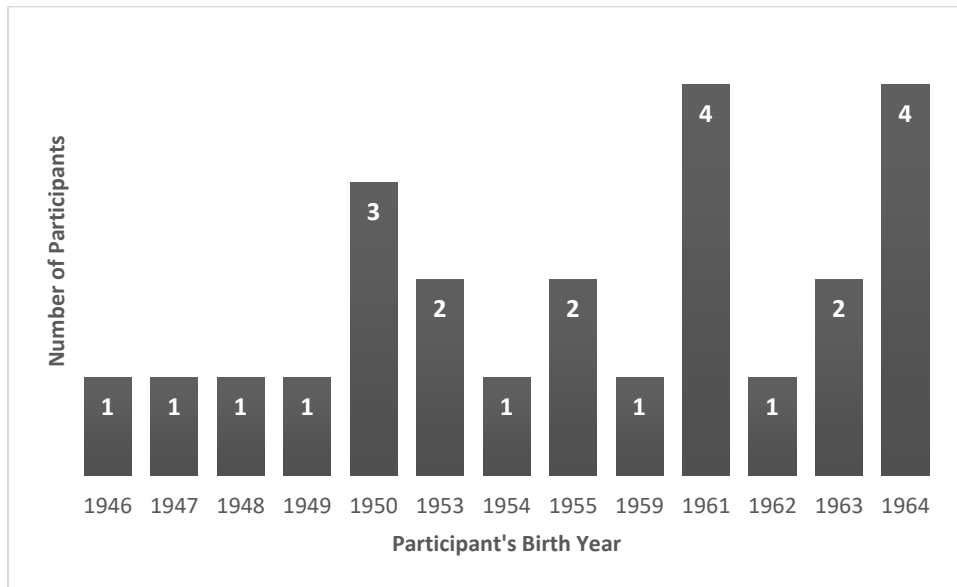
Table 1. Number of participants per birth year

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

MINA KISHINO

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

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 commnesality, 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 commnesality 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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COVID-19 Anxiety

LAURA JOHNSON[1]

For my roommate Carrie's birthday in November of 2020, I was informed that Apartment 302 would be going out to dinner at Olive Garden. COVID-19 cases were hitting record highs – on that day alone, there were 1,176 new cases in Hennepin County. But – it was Carrie's 21st birthday. As I was informed, "You only get to go out on your 21st once." And so, despite the past several months of takeout and home cooking that we had collectively agreed was for the best, we bundled up in our winter coats and piled into my roommate Arya's car to drive to the nearest Olive Garden in Roseville.

Several months prior I had been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. I was medicated and, for the most part, handling it well. The feelings of impending disaster and constant worrying were still there, but it was as if someone had lowered the volume on the tiny voice inside my head; however, on the car ride to Olive Garden, someone had cranked the volume up to max. This was my first time going out to eat in a restaurant for months – ever since the initial shutdown in March – and my brain was drowning in panic.

You are going to get COVID right before you go home for Thanksgiving.
You are going to kill Grandma.
Remember Grandma, the 86-year-old woman you are seeing in a week?
You are getting on a plane in several days.
You are going to give the entire plane and their extended families COVID,
all because of this Olive Garden outing.
You are the next Typhoid Mary.

When I get anxious, it is hard for an outsider to tell. The only indication that there is World War III going on behind my eyes is that I scratch. I will scratch the front of my neck, right above my collarbones, until I nearly draw blood. In every single picture of this night my neck is blotchy and red. I still have a brilliant smile and am laughing in nearly every photo. I carried on conversations, cracked jokes, and told stories. I am a surprisingly functional anxious person. To the other patrons that

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[1] All names in the narrative have been changed to protect anonymity.

LAURA JOHNSON is a pseudonym chosen by the author.

night, I am sure I looked like the picture of comfort, and like I regularly dined out during this pandemic. But I was not. I was suffocating.

At Olive Garden, I was delegated to talk to the hostess to get us a table. In the lobby, we were all wearing masks. The wait staff was all wearing masks. When people got up from their tables, they put on their masks. But when everyone was sitting, there were no masks. It did not make sense to my anxious brain. The risk of COVID-19 did not go away just because were all sitting at a table. When my roommates and I took our seats, I thought about keeping my mask on. But another voice in my head told me: *This is Carrie's 21st. Do not make this about you.* The anxiety of being selfish vs. the anxiety of COVID battle in my head. I reluctantly took off my mask. I felt like a trapped animal, stuck in the far side of the booth, unable to leave, while maskless conversation from strangers' rage around me.

When the waiter came over to take our order and give us breadsticks, he was wearing his mask. I wonder how he felt, always wearing a mask while talking to people without them. I thought about what a strange indicator of class this is. Most patrons, eating out at the height of a pandemic, can afford to go without their masks. They can take PTO at work, or just work from home. Zoom is commonplace in the academic and corporate world. But that is not an option for the restaurant industry – if they get COVID-19, barring any COVID PTO from corporate, that is a complete loss of income. There is no alternative.

I barely remember what I ate. It was some kind of pasta and a bunch of breadsticks. I think. To be honest, I barely remember most of the night. I look back on pictures and all I can see is my splotchy red neck.

The fear and panic that came along with eating out in the time of COVID-19 stuck around for a long time. After that November night, it took a lot of internal convincing and another five months for me to go out to eat again. That night in November remained raw and distressing and a historical moment that I hated being a part of – but an historical moment, nonetheless. Over first eight months of the pandemic, something as unremarkable as an evening at Olive Garden became a source of dread. And while I can think back on this venture to an Olive Garden five miles away and know that everything turned out OK (I did not kill my grandma, and I did not spread COVID-19 to anyone and everyone I know) it does not change how I felt in the moment – terrified.

"Just Give Me a Meme!": Popular Culture Insights from Crisis Food Communication

D. TRAVERS SCOTT

On October 2, 2021, social media giant Facebook went on a preemptive defense against an upcoming whistleblower interview with news program *60 Minutes*. Reports, such as those in the *New York Times*, had circulated that the whistleblower was going to claim Facebook had some degree of culpability for the January 6, 2021, insurrection attack on the US Capitol Building. The company, now known as Meta, had loosened their restrictions on misinformation and hate speech after the November 2020 presidential election. This claim was part of a larger story in which the whistleblower, revealed in the *60 Minutes* interview to be Frances Haugen, a civic misinformation team product manager at Facebook, released internal documents to the *Wall Street Journal.* These documents suggested that the company had possessed greater awareness than they had acknowledged regarding the negative health impact of the Facebook platform and also Instagram, which it owns, on adolescent girls in particular. According to *Yahoo News*, Facebook's vice president of policy and global affairs, Nick Clegg, responded in a broadcast interview with CNN:

> "I think the assertion (that) January 6th can be explained because of social media, I just think that's ludicrous," Clegg told the broadcaster, saying it was "false comfort" to believe technology was driving America's deepening political polarization.

The responsibility for the insurrection "lies squarely with the people who inflicted the violence and those who encouraged them – including then-president Trump" and others who asserted the election was stolen, he added. ("Facebook: 'Ludicrous…'")

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"Ludicrous" can be interpreted in at least two ways. In a generous reading, what was ludicrous was in reference to an issue of degree: that Facebook was solely or largely responsible for the January 6 riots. This is somewhat suggested by the phrase "can be explained because of social media." However, saying the blame "lies squarely" with individuals, not social media, seems to contradict a reading based on degree.

Alternately, the word ludicrous suggests that Facebook or Instagram could not conceivably undermine US democracy. This is because, I argue, despite their obvious trafficking in news and information, Facebook and Instagram began as play. They were initially received as idle entertainment, providing the happiness of connecting people. This image as harmless, pleasurable fun is perpetuated in their marketing and public relations to deflect concerns about their role in public news and information, which could impact looming regulatory fears, not to mention brand popularity. A recent example of this was the "Take on Anything" campaign of video commercials – atypical of the company – promoting "more together" with feel-good mini-narratives of dads, dancers, drag queens, and Deaf basketball players. These users and others were shown finding happiness through participation with in-person activities organized through Facebook Groups. The playful examples, such as "Screw it, Let's Talk Astrology," were generally about fun, and had a youthful, irreverent attitude. Groups for politics, health, activism, or other serious topics were generally not featured.

From this perspective, it is "ludicrous" to claim that a plaything, such as Facebook, could have played a role in an insurrection. It would be similar to suggesting a toy foam ball can be a murder weapon. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, the primary definition of the ludicrous is "so absurd or incongruous as to be laughable." This incongruity is key to my argument: that social media are incongruent with serious social ramifications, such as health and politics, because they are playthings. From politics to pandemic, events of recent years have made clear that playful social media can be serious phenomena. As I will examine here, during COVID-19 we can see how serious communication can also be playful.

In this article, I examine serious communication on social media, using the case of public-service food activism and information-sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on a sample of Instagram posts using the #covidfood hashtag, I argue that the most popular examples combined emotion with participation to create play. For scholars of popular culture and entertainment, the idea that play or playful experiences are socially important is not ludicrous. However, incorporating

playfulness into communications related to crises, health, and advocacy may often feel inappropriate or irreverent due to the seriousness of the situations. However, as the insurrection discussions described above indicate, play and playful activities are far from incongruous with important social communication. Indeed, they can help make it more effective. Here I aim to show how this works through analysis of personal Instagram posts and public-service Instagram posts using #covidfood.

Food, Communication, and Culture

Food and its related practices are forms of communication. To draw on James Carey's model, it can transmit new information: this is what my people eat; this is what quince tastes like. However, food works more as a form of ritual communication, as it expresses and reaffirms existing community values and identities. For example, in their exploration of urban foodways – paths of production, procurement, preparation, and consumption within cultural contexts – Lum and Vayer examine food as ritual communication, constituting and maintaining social identities in the present, in memory, and in anticipated futures. Similarly, Fusté-Forné examines cheese as communicating regional identity in Gouda, the Netherlands, hoping to use the insights to improve regional and local tourism planning and promotion. In this article, I set out to understand what insights food-related popular communication during pandemic can offer to help crisis, advocacy, and other applied forms of communication. I approach contemporary popular communication from the perspective Barbie Zelizer, synthesizing numerous critical theorists' takes on "the popular," described in 2002. Zelizer notes that, while "all communication has popular dimensions," the project for popular communication scholars involves the demystification of communication in everyday life. Zelizer describes three fundamental aspects of popular communication scholarship: interdisciplinary, eclectic in theory, method, and focus; and connecting "the academy and real life" (303). This paper follows this perspective through an interdisciplinary combination of strategic communication and media theory, a method combining visual, textual, and audience analyses, and connecting the academic realm of crisis communication with the everyday of social media.

Drawing on theories of virality, affect, and play, I examine popular posts from individuals and public-service messaging from various organizations in the United States through their Instagram posts hashtagged #covidfood. Through close

readings of three examples, I argue that they demonstrate how affective participation creates play, which can aid the spread of important information.

Early pandemic was a time of urgent food-related issues: learning to cook, reconciling dietary issues with delivery services, fearing viral transmission on food packaging, avoiding restaurants and grocery stores, and navigating food assistance programs. Food was also a topic of viral social media, such as isolation weight-gain complaints and defenses (Zucker et al.) and the TikTok "food-waste meme," in which participants posted ambiguous, perhaps metaphoric, videos of throwing away significant quantities of good food (Adikwu). *Vox* created a typology of different "quarantine meme houses" (an evolution of the "lunch table" meme, a sort of personality-profile based on who sits together at lunch), grouping popular covid memes that included regrowing scallions, bread, and Dalgona coffee (Romano). An article in the *Independent* claimed that, during the pandemic, "the meme has become the most prevalent and most comforting art form" (van Hagen), suggesting the emotional work involved in these memes. However, public-service messaging in social media faced the burden of conveying information, not just comfort. Yet, to be effective, such efforts needed to harness affect to solicit participation through sharing. Furthermore, in the crisis of pandemic, the arena of food communication also had the challenge of transmitting information about a deeply cultural topic.

It has long been thought that humor can indicate irreverence toward or disrespect of the topic of communication (Raskin). From a communication ethics perspective, media professionals and public relations practitioners share the belief that crises should consider the affective dimension of communication, prioritizing neutrality, objectivity, and empathy out of respect for their audiences' sensitivities during crisis (Austin and Jin). During the pandemic, marketers have particularly called for deploying empathy to compensate for isolation and social distancing and also practicing a "careful use of humor" (Hoekstra and Leefland 258). However, caution is often antithetical to humor. Yet, health communication scholars note that humor can serve useful functions during crisis, such as reduction of tension and increased persuasiveness, but care must be taken to not alienate those with high ego investment in an issue, provoke divisiveness, or overwhelm the informational message (Meyer and Venette). The tension around humor in crisis communication, specifically regarding a pandemic, was illustrated deftly in 2002 when the television program *South Park* declared that "AIDS is finally funny" (Parker).

Virality, Affect, Participation, and Play

As Barker notes in his analysis of *Pretty Little Liars* as "social TV," social media impact has established new measures of popularity. Virality predates the contemporary use of the term "meme" to describe widely shared online popular communication. For example, in 2005, I used the term "virals" to analyze humorous anti-George W. Bush images and animations shared through email in the 2004 US presidential campaign ("Protest").

Of course, not every chunk of content that goes viral is a meme. Memes are hard to define – what Shifman calls "a conceptual troublemaker" (362). Wiggins and Bowers describe memes as developing from an evolutionary biology concept to a metaphor used by digital media scholars to refer to a textual genre that "hinges upon the notion of virality that is quintessential to memetic examination" (890). Wiggins' review of meme scholarship argues that memes are human-driven forms that are spread, distributed, replicated, remixed, and propagated across online networks. They involve imitation, which Shifman breaks down into three dimensions: its content of ideas and ideologies, its form as perceived through our senses, and the stance or position taken by the author in relation to the previous iteration(s).

However, in popular usage, "meme" can describe any piece of viral online content, with or without variations. It can also refer to very specific formats, such as image macros, call-out challenges, and viral videos. During the first months of pandemic, a university employee helping coordinate food-related crisis responses described to me a meeting of researchers, public health officials, and community activists. As they were trying to hammer out a crisis messaging strategy, one community leader threw up her hands and sighed, "Just give me a meme!"

While my examples here do not fit a current strict scholarly definition of meme, I examine them in the sense that, when asking "just give me a meme," the community leader did not mean specifically to give her an image macro built upon existing chains of parody and remix. She was asking to give her something with similar immediacy, succinctness, and ease of sharing. In crisis, communication does not have to be a meme, but it needs the juice of virality. Jenkins' term for this is spreadable media, which Wiggins and Bowers build upon to delineate three stages of "going viral." This begins with a piece of intentionally designed

spreadable media, then becomes an emergent meme in early sharing, then finally a meme.

But why do some spreadable media become fully viral memes, and others do not? The large and varied body of literature on the topic lacks consensus. In one popular model, Shifman defines the "6 Ps" for memetic success as: positivity and humor, provocation of high-arousal emotions (positive and negative), participation (encouraging users to not merely share it, but do other things as well), packaging (simple organization of content), prestige (of the author), and positioning (launching from the right platforms/accounts). In the case of advocacy communication, Mazid examines strategic communication of LGBTQ nonprofits on Facebook, finding that indirect advocacy strategy, using tactics such as participating in protests, public education, grassroots lobbying, voter registration and education, and media advocacy, generates more virality than an insider strategy and tactics of working within institutional systems. For this article, I will focus on three interconnected dimensions of popular viral communication: *affect* and participation combined in *play*. In addition to the scholarly literature I will describe, my perspective is informed by my 13-year career in advertising prior to academia, as well as recent experiences with persons who worked in food security during the pandemic.

Zizi Papacharissi, in an interview with Henry Jenkins discussing her book *Affective Publics* and drawing on the work of Raymond Williams, describes social media platforms as "soft structures of feeling." She says,

> Collaborative narratives organized by hashtags represent structures of feeling, that connect (or divide) differentiated classes of people and complex relations of structures around subjective and affectively charged expressions, restraints, impulses, tensions, and tones. Technologies may network us, but it is our stories, emergent in these structures of feeling, that connect us (or disconnect us, for that matter). (Jenkins)

In the Instagram posts examined here, #covidfood is such a collaborative narrative representing a structure of feeling connecting people.

An interdisciplinary array of scholars from varied disciplines have supported such a perspective on the importance of affect in understanding social media. Berger and Milkman found that *New York Times* articles with strong emotions (positive and negative) were more likely to be highly shared. Measuring the psychophysiological data of Facebook users, Alhabash et al "echo[ed] past findings related to the importance of emotionality as a driver for virality" (212). Combining

insights from psychology, art theory, neuroscience, and marketing, Ling et al studied 4chan's *Politically Incorrect Board*, finding that "highly viral memes are more likely to [...] include positive or negative emotions" (81). Previously, I have argued that a *suprarational* perspective – a narrative sensibility that includes evoking emotion as well as transmitting information – can help to understand why some social-media stories gain the momentum to cross over into mainstream news media ("Tempests"), and that feelings of empathy were a key driver in the virality of the "Leave Britney Alone!" video ("Empathetic").

Emotion has also been described as central to popular culture. Writing in the debut issue of *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, editor Bob Batchelor acknowledged the near impossibility of defining the popular, but did propose

> to view popular culture as the connections that form between individuals and objects. It is one's engaging with a popular culture entity that then produces a feeling in the person that takes culture to an emotional level. I suggest that it is this instinctual link to culture that results in the chemical reaction that bursts in one's brain when encountering popular culture items. That rush can feel like or actually be chemistry, hatred, attraction, antipathy, or love. (1)

Thus, this paper foregrounds emotion in its analysis as central to popular communication in social media.

Participation is another key analytic here. Shifman argues that human agency is key to understanding viral phenomena, as users are not mere vectors for memes and similar practices, but actively (re)create and share them. I argue that participation involves both the affordances for interaction and the invitation to do so. Not every call to action is an invitation to participation. "Buy this product" does not generally entail participating in the item's research, design, or development. "Vote for this candidate" does invite one to participate in the political process, but to act only in a limited and directed way that does not involve, at this stage, participating in the development of a campaign or policies. I use "participation" here to refer to interactively contributing to both the creation of virality through sharing and also the productive creation of versions, additions, and/or commentary.

To return to affect, Mukhongo reminds us that participation takes many forms and moods, drawing on Zuckerberg's cute cat theory. This is the idea that even the most playful social media platforms can be used for important functions, such as advocacy and activism. Examining the humorous appropriation of protest memes in Kenya, she writes,

> While we might be tempted to dismiss playful civic engagement and viral memes as just being funny "cat" memes, [...] participatory cultures have a role to play in driving political contestation and mobilisation for collective action. (165)

Taking affect into account, then, I argue that certain forms of emotion can transform participation into play. Game scholars Masek and Stenros, in their cross-disciplinary review of the concept, define play/playfulness through a synthesis of six themes: focused, openness, framing, non-consequential, non-real reality, and unconventional. In social media, for example, consider mimetic literacy. This is a concept Dibbell and others describe as the understanding of in-jokes and references in iterative viral phenomena. Such familiarity provokes a positive feeling of belonging and insider knowledge. Whether comment-and-reply threads or versions of image macro memes, popular social media evoke a form of play that is similar to an exquisite corpse game. In terms of pandemic food communication, assuaging negative emotions by providing comfort – in the form of social support, normalization, humor, and other factors – can be understood as a key affective driver of sharing viral posts aimed to make someone else feel better and make the sharer feel good about themselves. In pandemic food communication, how was this taking place on Instagram? I will attempt to show in my examples how affect and participation create play, even in the consequential situation of pandemic.

A Case Study in Pandemic Food Communication on Instagram

Gillham defines a case as a present-based "unit of human activity" that is context-dependent for understanding, but also "merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw" (1). Although definitions vary across disciplines, case study research typically examines a case through flexible research question(s), multiple kinds of evidence which are in the the case setting, and often no a priori theoretical notions (Gillham; Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe; Stake; Yin). This latter element is what Stake refers to as an intrinsic case study – interested more in gaining insight into the case itself than theory-building – or Yin describes as an exploratory case study – one without clear outcomes.

This intrinsic, exploratory study uses as its case food-related Instagram posts during the COVID-19 pandemic. To explore how affect, participation, and play were involved in food communication during the pandemic, I chose the social media platform Instagram due to its popularity, ease of use, and support for visual

and textual elements. All of these make it a common conduit for viral media spread. Instagram offers many of the familiar affordances of spreadability, such as likes and comments, as well as remixing and iterative adaptions, depending on whether one is crafting a post, story, or reel. Sharing to and from chat, email, and other platforms is supported. Sharing or reposting within Instagram can be easily accomplished using third-party apps.

The unit of analysis here is an original Instagram standard post, including comments. Inclusion was determined by posts using the hashtag #covidfood, as use of a hashtag suggested an awareness and intentionality on the part of the author (rather than just a post about food that happened to be published during the pandemic). Exclusions included reposts, to eliminate duplications and posts that did not originally use the #covidfood hashtag, and Instagram stories (informal temporary posts) and reels (videos), to maintain consistency in analysis.

As of September 9, 2021, searching Instagram, the hashtag #covidfood had been published on 16,048 posts. The Instagram Hashtag Collector component of the automated data-extraction application PhantomBuster was used to request the most popular 1000 posts and their metadata (e.g., username, full name, comment count, like count, view count, publication date, timestamp, profile URL, etc.). "Popularity" was determined by a combination of engagement (views, likes, comments) and other factors PhantomBuster does not disclose.

Slightly more posts were returned than requested (1056). I divided the posts into three categories: personal posts by an individual (406), public posts by an organization (144), and commercial posts (506) by individuals or organizations promoting goods or services. However, as Matthew McAlister notes, commercial culture often intrudes into popular culture, creating hybrids. In hybrid cases, such as an individual personal account that mentioned the person's commercial business but was not an explicit call to action to patronize them, I examined their feed to determine which of the three categories the account most often and most closely resembled in content. Commercial posts were then excluded. In examining the intersection of popular and crisis communication, I wanted to keep focus on these two dimensions and avoid a third dynamic of explicit persuasion to purchase.

The earliest popular post returned dated May 13, 2020. Jack and Baxter emphasize the importance for the researcher to describe the context of their case. In terms of pandemic, the period of May 13, 2020, through September 9, 2021, begins with what I call "the onset of a new normal." According to Yale University's COVID-19 Timeline, March-April 2020 saw the first round of global cancellations

and closures of borders, sporting events, schools, and the like, as well as the beginning of mask-wearing and social distancing. May and June saw attempts at phased re-openings fail to flatten the curve of new cases. Two months into my sample, negative mental health impacts of isolation, unemployment, working from home, interrupted school/childcare, and related factors began. August 2020 saw, in Hong Kong, the first documented case of reinfection. In the fall, world leaders, such as U.S. President Trump, tested positive for the virus; winter saw cases rising as cold weather drove persons indoors in the Northern Hemisphere. Approved vaccines appeared in December 2020, but so did variant mutations of the virus. In 2021, a new wave from the Delta variant upended attempts at returning to normal. The pandemic also exacerbated tensions arising from populist political movements in many countries, such as Brazil, the United States, and the United Kingdom. According to the World Bank, in 2020 extreme poverty rose globally for the first time in 20 years, with 2021 becoming a year of "the inequality pandemic," in which vaccine distribution and economic recovery varied greatly among high-income and low-income countries. Finally, according to Statista, during this period Instagram had approximately one billion active users, with the highest popularity in India (201 million) and the United States (157 million). Two-thirds of Instagram users were between the ages of 18 and 34.

A first analysis examined the posts from this period to gain familiarity with overall style, format, and content. Popularity was assessed using two engagement metrics: likes and comments. Of the 144 public posts, there was a range of 0–24 comments, and a range of 2–233 likes. Given the greater labor required to write a comment, the 24 commented posts were categorized as more popular. The likes were fairly evenly distributed, so the upper third was chosen to be categorized as more popular, 48 posts with a range of 23–233 likes. This resulted in a pool of 66 public posts marked as more popular by one or both metrics. Of the 406 personal posts, there was a range of 0–100 comments and 0–8193 likes. The 255 commented posts were categorized as more popular. Of the 400 liked post, the upper third of 133 posts were categorized as more popular. This resulted in a pool of 265 personal posts marked as more popular by one or more metrics. At this point, video posts were discarded to maintain consistency for comparison, resulting in 56 public posts and 255 personal posts. Each of these pools was then examined, and notable cases of affect, play, and/or participation were flagged. This resulted in 12 public posts and 20 personal posts, from which the examples described here were taken.

The methods used to analyze these posts included a visual-semiotic analysis of the posts' primary image(s), a textual analysis of the posts' titles and captions, and a reception analysis of comments (linguistic and iconic) posted by viewers. Each of these were analyzed closely for aspects of affect, participation, and play, including image content, design, captions, comments, and replies. The examples here represent successful spreadable media within a specific platform around a specific topic. However, like any platform, Instagram varies by hardware, operating system, version, and third-party apps. Therefore, I emphasize the contingency of this study.

I do not wish to disparage the hard and necessary work, under tight circumstances, done by advocacy organizations. Therefore, instead of presenting negative counterexamples, I will show an individual popular example, a hybrid popular-public example, and one of the best examples of a public organization harnessing emotion, participation, and play. In contrast, I will mention, but without naming specific organizations, what appears more commonly in even the best of public #covidfood posts.

Popular Post: fruitnerd

Australian Thanh Truong, whose Instagram account is titled fruitnerd, made this post on August 14, 2021 (Fig. 1). It was one of the most popular posts using #covidfood, with 752 likes and 26 comments. The caption included three "tips that might help or inspire you" when shopping for produce: request a cardboard box for better transport and storage, use pandemic free time to google unfamiliar items and try something new, and, if in isolation, use a delivery service or call a fruit store to see if they'll deliver. Although personal, his post is direct advocacy, encouraging certain behaviors to help persons with food and nutrition resources.

Figure 1. fruitnerd. Public Instagram post.

Happiness and joy are evident on Truong's big smile, but he harnesses more than pleasurable affect. His caption begins with sober acknowledgement of lockdown's "frustration" and "anxiety," and he hopes followers are "keeping safe" in "whatever circumstance you are in." This evocation of negative pandemic emotions allows for a classical problem/solution persuasive structure, as he segues to "fruits and vegetables can be part of keeping you healthy, keeping your mood positive and keeping your stomach more than satiated!" The original emotions evoked are unpleasant, but through them he engenders empathy with and gratitude from his viewers, and then pivots to his action item: produce. He even positions mood as a fulcrum, balancing health and satiation. Truong does not merely convey an advocacy emotion of hope; he harnesses multiple affects, building his audience relationship with a rhetorical structure guiding to his goal. Affect engages participation.

The medium used here is participatory, although Truong does not ask followers to like, subscribe, or share. Instead, participation is evoked in this post by positioning the viewer as engaging in their own versions of the activity shown. His tips give them specific, actionable steps to enhance and improve the experiences. He suggests more than a single way to participate in this activity: "Here's a pic of me. [...] I hope you find something in this picture that peaks [sic] your interest, that you go hunting for, and it makes your day!" Note this is not a directive but an invitation to share and join in – to participate.

Truong's emojis not only emphasize the playful emotion of the post, they are also a participatory act in decoding and recoding their meanings. Like slang, emojis and related icons have variable meanings depending on if you are an insider of a particular group. Emojis require literacy, much like memes, and that depends on ritual communication of communicative groups and cultures. Nineteen of the reply comments, including his own, use emojis. Most of these have straightforward meanings, but this can have significance as well. One comment uses an eggplant emoji, indicating participation in a communicative group that either does not know or intentionally disregards the emoji's globally infamous use as a phallic and sexual symbol. Truong invokes the emotion of nationalistic pride and communal support in his first words, "With so much of Australia currently in lockdown," and this invokes others to participate by doing the same. When one commenter mentions Saigon, Truong includes a Vietnamese flag emoji in his response to their comment. A subsequent comment includes an Australian flag emoji, and another includes a South African one, without mentioning the country, although Truong's reply includes "thanks for the wishes from SA."

Play is conveyed by the account name itself. The self-deprecating "fruitnerd" undercuts authoritarian expertise and evokes the enthusiastic enjoyment of pursuits that are "nerding out." "Fruit" is playful in its sensory evocation of sweetness, desserts, pleasure, and snacks at sports or after school, unlike "produce" or "vegetables." Yet, the picture and account are about fruits, vegetables, and herbs. (Indeed, arguably the irritation and invectives sometimes thrown at the term "veggies" illustrate a limit-case failure in attempting to impose playfulness.) In naming and branding the account, Truong emphasizes a playful spirit over strict reflection of content. This is precisely the sort of thing destined for being torpedoed in the collective decision-making of much public communication. One can imagine, if proposing "fruitnerd" as a campaign theme or mascot, stakeholders objecting to the inaccuracy, the negative reactions from vegetable-oriented or herb-oriented partners, or the unhealthy overemphasis on sugar. It would never survive a committee but works here brilliantly, because it privileges a sense of fun to engage the viewer. It is most important to secure their attention, then they will soon encounter vegetables and herbs in the account's content. Emotionally, this communicates trust in and respect for the viewer.

"Getting your greens" is not simply presented in a playful manner, it is presented as a form of play. Truong frames buying produce as the leisure activity of shopping. The two crates, filled with over a dozen items of bright colors and

exciting textures, are the result of browsing, exploring, and selecting: shopping as a leisure and entertainment practice, or creative activity such as curating, rather than an errand or chore. His playful, fruit-patterned shirt underscores pleasure-shopping by connecting his products to those products perhaps best known for pleasure-shopping: fashion.

Public Post: Covid Resources India

Covid Resources India (CRI) describes itself as a "team of volunteers helping people get access to COVID-19 Resources PAN India." With only 20 posts, they had 2684 followers and one of their posts, on July 5, 2021, had 80 likes and one comment (Fig. 2).
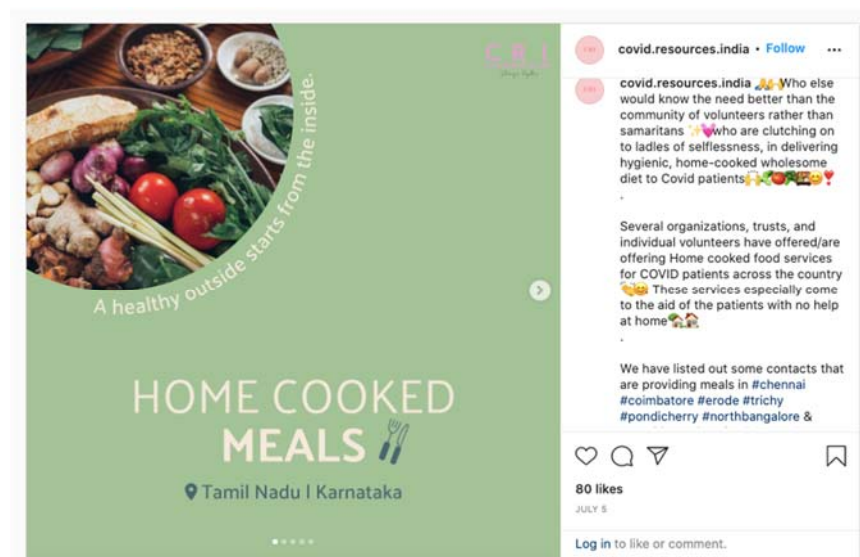
Figure 2. Home Cooked Meals. Public Instagram post by Covid Resources India.

Most public-service #covidfood posts did not exhibit depictions of play or playful attributes. With its headline "Home Cooked Meals" and the inset picture of fresh ingredients, CRI's post is not nearly as playful as that by fruitnerd. However, it has light-hearted design elements uncommon in other public posts. The circle image at upper left, partially bleeding off the margins, has a line of text curving alongside it. The circular image evokes Instagram's circular profile icons, as does the large map-location icon at the bottom of the post. These, I argue, emphasize the

social-media-ness of the post, giving it a playful feel. The knife and fork icons are similarly playful in their big, graphic style. The circular wrapping text is irreverent in its disregard for clarity and standard legibility. The aphorism, "a healthy outside starts from the inside," has a balanced, sing-song quality like a jump-rope chant or nursery rhyme. The caption makes healthy use of emojis as well.

The post has an unusual degree of playfulness compared to the typically dry, dour, and urgent public posts. It does this by capitalizing on another participatory aspect of the platform: the multi-image post. What I have described is the cover image, but when clicking on a white arrow at right, one advances through 3 more images, listing 11 service organizations in a similar green and white design. The footers contain "verified: June 26, 2021" and the URL www.covidgethelp.in (but not a clickable link). A final image has information about CRI. The post uses a multi-image format rather than jamming all the information into a text-heavy image. Again, one can imagine a review committee saying, "But what if they don't click? All the necessary information must be visible at once!" Instead, the post exhibits trust in and respect for the user to interact, rather than slamming them with an authoritarian laundry list.

What makes this participatory is that the post caption is not oriented to using these services yourself, it is aimed toward encouraging followers to participate in volunteering for the organizations. The caption begins lauding the "community of volunteers," then encourages readers to "Help people with food in troublesome times. [bento box emoji] [smile emoji] You'll have the incredible satisfaction helping people who are in despair. [raising hands emoji] [vibrating pink heart emoji]." The post playfully encourages viewers to participate by joining the community of volunteers providing relief efforts, and it uses the emotional appeal of "incredible satisfaction" from helping "despair." It avoids the use of exclamation marks to convey urgency, keeping its emotional tone cool. Emotional restraint and appropriateness are also things popular communication can teach advocacy and crisis communication. I recall an advertising-industry humor website around 2001 selling T-shirts that read, in plain black and white, "I don't do exclamation marks." This indicates the counter-productive use of emotion in commercial and often advocacy communication, an overly strident emotion appeal.

Hybrid Example: TheWarrior_Stories

TheWarrior_Stories is described on Instagram as a "personal blog." However, the English homepage to which it links refers to itself as a "platform," and mixes singular and plural pronouns: "I feel that such stories are inspiration to everyone," "our platform," and "about us." It feels like an organization, if perhaps started and run by a single person. Nineteen of their posts were in my sample of top #covidfood posts, with 0-20 comments and 7-91 likes. The one I've chosen to discuss here (Fig. 3) had 11 comments and 23 likes. The blog uses a standard format for its posts, so it is fairly representative.
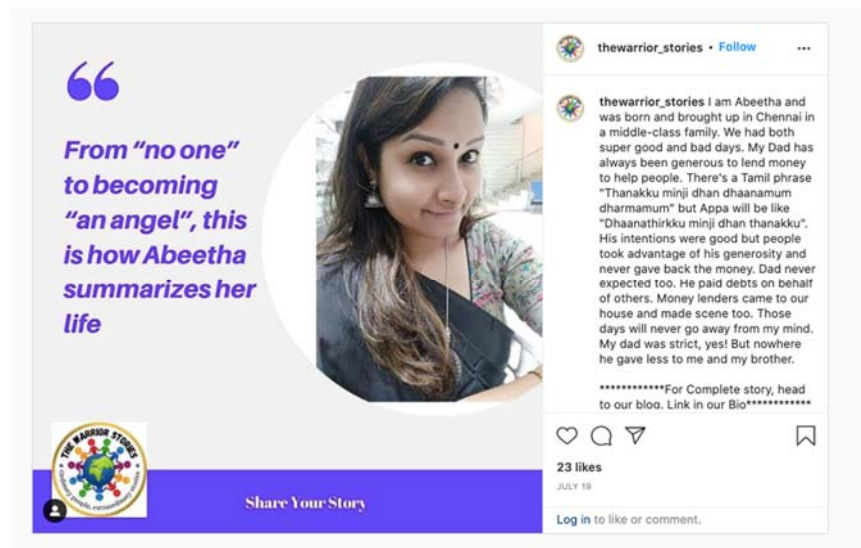
Figure 3. Abeetha. Public Instagram post by TheWarrior_Stories.

Building upon what I described previously, I argue that the large graphic elements, such as the open quotation marks at upper right and footer bar, the large type of the pull quote, the generous white space, and the curving crop lines on the photo, all have a playful or light-hearted irreverence to them. It is not the overly serious treatment and dense, crowded information typical of crisis or advocacy communication. The facial expression of Abeetha could be read as playful or otherwise, but her first-person caption uses casual colloquial language ("super good," "will be like") that, if not exceedingly playful, is very informal, a location on the continuum of playfulness. The interpersonal dimension of a facial portrait, enhanced in fruitnerd's smile and Abeetha's direct eye contact, gives the post

emotional resonance, as does her fond anecdote of her father. The full story, to which the post links, describes his death inspiring her to volunteer with a pandemic support helpline. Although not in the main caption, emojis are used frequently in the comments.

Most significant, however, is participation. TheWarrior_Stories Instagram is an outreach of the *Warrior Stories* website, which is not merely a writer and publisher of inspirational pandemic stories, it is a platform where "you can share ordinary stories like taking care of your covid infected family, buying medicines for people in need, arranging food for the needy ones, doctor taking care of patients, nurse doing double duties or anything that you feel like sharing." The Instagram posts lead you to a web platform built for users to participate in sharing stories. It is participatory, by definition, at its core.

Conclusion: Go for the Lolz

It is understandable that, if one considers play to be trivial or insignificant, it would be inappropriate to express such irreverence in a crisis. This is something very important that popular communication, and popular examples of public communication, can teach those working in advocacy, crisis, and strategic communication. Play, in all of its degrees and forms, is important. Play is essential. Play touches on the deepest parts of what it means to be human. Play teaches individuals and build societies. It supports health and quality of life. It forges empathy and compassion. Engaging play is not incongruous, it is humane.

Yet, play can be cruel or hurtful. Childhood play can include hurting animals or others. As Tuters and Hagen observe in their study of an anti-Semitic meme, mimetic literacy can foster feelings of community, but to reactionary and negative groups. Marturano's historic overview of virality metaphors from bioscience to computing and social media points out that virality is amoral. As social media propaganda and disinformation campaigns have made clear, affective participation as play can be put toward negative ends.

However, popular communication reminds us that it is not always about the ends. One type of participation that play brings to attention is trifling. As Mitchell describes, trifling is a concept from Bernard Suits' play theory in which some players, triflers, may know the rules of the game, but ignore the goals. In *Gamer Theory*, Wark used Suits' concept of the trifler, stating that a trifler is "someone who ignores the [game's] objective to linger within its space" and engages in

"unimportant" activities (para. 40). Instead of trying to win, they *play* in the game environment. Why is this relevant? A trifler ignores the goals, and a goal is a directive: This is what you should be doing for this reason, to achieve this goal. It is authoritarian. Authority, note, does not mean the state exclusively, but also companies, products, and brands, including individual influencers or wannabes. There is a difference between someone sharing something with you, which you in turn share, and someone sharing it with you with an explicit "Here, share this widely!" directive.

From anti-masking to QAnon conspiracies, pandemic communication has been deeply politicized, immersed in realms of affect. Populist and anti-government politicizations reject many things perceived as authoritarian, and crisis communication inherently is authoritative: "You should do this." Crisis communication, public health, and similar transmission of information messaging often miss the ritualistic aspects of community, the potential to harness affect and participation as play, and they can overlook, if not actively antagonize, the trifler, who is indifferent to goal(s) and goal-orientation in general. Memes and other viral media can be anti-authoritarian, or at least feel that way, in their irreverence, even in crisis. The spreadability of memes suggests that they are not following directions but doing it "for the lolz," as early internet trolls used to say. Like trolling, there is an anarchistic element to memes, a chaotic thrill that not only goes against the sober goals of public communication but also can beg to break or disrupt them. A troll wants to disrupt, and a trifler doesn't necessarily care, but they are both in it for the play, an insight popular communication can offer crisis communication.

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"Save Money and Save the Planet": The Rhetorical Appeal and Use of (Anti-)Food Waste and Rescue Apps During Covid-19

LEDA COOKS

Two contradictory events occurred during the early months of COVID-19: 1) with portrayals of food rotting in fields and in distribution centers, more public attention was drawn to reports of massive waste all along the food chain, and 2) more people were buying more food than they needed or could possibly use and wasting it (Roe et al. 404). Simultaneously, more people were working from home and, more generally, eating all their meals at home. The incredible rise in use of apps that facilitated food delivery has been a subject of media attention and academic research (e.g., Sharma et. al). Less reported or studied has been the rise during COVID-19 in the use of apps that claimed to aid in food waste reduction.

Throughout the rhetoric of government reports about food waste, media coverage of excessive food and waste amidst hunger, and the many local, state and regional, national and international food waste reduction campaigns, food waste is represented as a distribution problem, eminently solvable through donations to those in need of food (Arcuri, 264). In this article, I look at the ways food waste became more visible in mainstream US culture during COVID-19 and how the rhetoric of food waste apps mediates the relationships between food, technology and identity. The question motivating this research is about the apps' usefulness, both in the formation of the identity and lifestyle practices of those who employ them and how those identities and practices relate to the complicated problems of food insecurity and food waste.

Specifically, my focus is on the apps that have received the most media coverage during COVID-19 and/or have the most users, namely Food Rescue US (FRUS) and Too Good to Go (TGTG). The two apps have been expanding rapidly since the start of the pandemic and are examined here to determine their discursive

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appeal as well as how their use addresses food waste reduction. My analysis of the appeal of the apps centers on their descriptions by the media, reviewers, their websites, and any user ratings or comments. Warren Belasco's triad of responsibility, identity and convenience, along with the materialist food studies of Isabel de Solier inform the theoretical framework underlying my analysis. I am interested in the ways the apps position food waste ethically in relation to consumption and the political positioning of food waste as a food justice issue exacerbated by COVID-19. I focus on the appeal of food waste apps to understand how designers, food businesses, and consumers make meaning of their identities and actions around food waste. I want to learn how people form ideas about ethical and moral behavior through the circuits of rhetoric and performance that make these technologies useful, how they relate to and identify with material objects as self-formation. I begin by broadly considering how decisions made about what to eat during COVID-19 are related to decisions made about food waste and recovery, looking to the ethical implications inherent both in the framing of food waste reduction and in findings. FRUS typifies the kind of large (regional and national) scale app that connects individual volunteer drivers with food donors (grocery stores and other food service businesses) and food banks and shelters via food rescue organizations. TGTG is an example of the larger category of apps that offer reduced pricing to consumers for (mostly prepared) food that would otherwise be thrown out.

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic when, in the United States, all nonessential business was shut down and/or went online, much of the food supply chain shut down as well. Unemployment skyrocketed. Farms lost labor, as did their distribution/processing outlets, restaurants and caterers had food they could not serve, and grocery store shelves were often bare for the first time in recent memory. Consumer spending declined for food eaten away from home by 51% between April 2019 and April 2020, even as it spiked as high as 70% above average for grocery purchases ("Food and Consumers"). Hoping to address the fast-growing rates of food insecurity, several consumer-based government food aid programs (through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)) were introduced under the umbrella of the American Rescue Plan: a Pandemic electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card, an expansion of the supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP) benefits and extension of online purchasing, expanded women, infants and children (WIC) benefits and others addressing specific populations. Still, the numbers of people going to their local food shelters and pantries increased to the point that

many agencies were unable to meet community needs. Other USDA programs, "Farms to Food Banks" and "Farmers to Food Box," were introduced to address food not able to be distributed and sold through the supply chain ("Food and Nutrition Service Responds to Covid-19"). Both programs were reported to increase waste among clients who could not choose the food they were receiving (Roe et.al. 402). Regardless of some valiant public and private attempts to match otherwise wasted food with food insecure people, both food waste and food insecurity continue to be on the rise (Roe et al. 403-404).

Food Anti-Waste and Rescue Apps

Advertised as a way to end food waste, the purpose of food (anti-) waste apps is the facilitation of the re/distribution of otherwise wasted food for businesses (potential food donors), consumers, food banks and pantries. During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, media coverage of the effects of the shutdown on the food supply chain showed a tremendous amount of food waste, even as grocery store shelves were bare. Meanwhile, as restaurants, bakeries, delis, and other purveyors of prepared food had to focus their operations on takeout, delivery apps facilitated the conveyance of groceries and prepared meals under COVID-19 protocol. As producers, distributors, and consumers became increasingly comfortable with food delivery apps, the use of apps that posted food no longer available for retail sale also doubled (Baraniuk). Many food waste reduction and rescue apps expanded their outreach into urban areas around the United States (as well as other countries with industrialized food systems). The use of food (anti-) waste apps, consumer-based apps that sell leftover restaurant and other prepared food, has become especially prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when information is relatively cheap and readily available and people have the flexibility to look for deals (Yoder). Once consumers select and buy the food, they can go and pick it up. Of course, in addition to technical ease of use, for the app to be convenient there must be restaurants, delis, or other prepared food outlets nearby who elect to participate. As the use of food (anti-) waste apps rose during the COVID-19 pandemic, so too did the numbers of restaurants and other smaller providers of prepared food that signed on (DiBenedetto). Likewise, the increased use of food rescue apps and platforms connecting food providers with networks of food rescuers and recipient agencies (such as shelters and food banks) has eased the logistical difficulties of food rescue. Food rescue apps encourage consumers upset

about massive food wastage to ease their moral conscience by donating or transporting post-consumer food to shelters for the food insecure (Adkisson).

Platforms and apps designed for the donation, rescue, and consumption of non or no-longer retail food mediate neoliberal self or identity formation, postindustrial lifestyles, and other im/material relationships. The idea that one can be a good person and a good citizen-consumer by buying otherwise wasted food at a reduced rate, or maybe by delivering donated food to food shelters, became attractive to many during a time when people were feeling isolated and many were looking for connection or a new experience.

Identity, Responsibility and Convenience in Food Waste Donation and Discount

In "Food: The Key Concepts," Warren Belasco posed a triangle to describe how people in the United States and other nations with highly industrialized food systems make decisions about what to eat. At the apex is responsibility, an immediate and long-term awareness of the systemic consequences of one's food decisions, and at the base are identity and convenience. Identity encompasses personal and cultural notions of preference, taste, and taboo, while convenience is defined by its emphasis on accessibility and affordability (11-12). Belasco notes that, "For the most part, people decide what to eat based on a rough negotiation – a pushing and tugging – between the dictates of identity and convenience, with somewhat lesser guidance from the considerations of responsibility. (The triangle is thus not quite equilateral, though the moralist might wish it were so)" (10).

While Belasco observed that the food industry is primarily focused on convenience as a selling point (11-12), in the last decades increasingly identity and responsibility have also played a stronger role in targeting products, even on a mass level. Growing popular awareness of the problems of sustainability of the food system, food insecurity, and food waste has led many corporations to position themselves as thoughtful stewards of the environment, and consumers of their products can identify themselves similarly as responsible and discretionary in the food products that they choose. In this manner, the triad of responsibility, identity and convenience shifts from decisions made about food to those made about food waste. Large food retailers' websites and social media (e.g., Walmart) now routinely recognize the problems of food waste and food insecurity and highlight their role in reducing both through food donation. While reducing waste at the

source is the number one preference for food waste reduction, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ("Food Recovery Hierarchy"), it is the most difficult. Food producers in a capitalist economy have little incentive to produce less, especially in markets where farmers earn estimates of 7.8 cents of every dollar from their crops (Dewey), and oversupply is necessary for food businesses to make a profit. The donation of otherwise wasted food to feed hungry people is the second most preferred option by the EPA, but it is by far the most utilized choice for waste reduction efforts (Arcuri, 264).

The triad of responsibility, identity, and convenience offers an elegant explanation for the popularity of donation as the best method of food waste reduction for consumers as well. On the consumer end of the food chain, identity, responsibility, and convenience play an equal role for many US Americans concerned about food waste reduction. Mirroring the convenience promoted by the food industry, for those with capital, most food is easy to access and often overly abundant. Food is often less valued than other goods, and therefore people find it easier to waste. However, partially as a result of the increased media coverage of food waste before and during the first months of COVID-19, along with large scale waste reduction campaigns, middle class consumers increasingly felt responsible for food waste, and guilt over wasteful habits. Combined with the pervasive characterization of people who waste food as lazy, careless, or excessive, waste could easily be seen as an issue of personal choice, and thus of identity (Nguyen). Food donation provides a way to reduce guilt over excess through conveniently giving away what is not needed through acts of charity that make the donor feel better about themselves.

Social media campaigns aimed at food waste reduction would seem to play heavily into the valences of Belasco's triangle, especially where citizen/consumer identities around issues of sustainability and food justice are on display. In fact, the broader question of the influence of formal and informal social media campaigns on food waste reduction has spurred a good deal of research with mixed results as to the question of whether these interventions work (Young et al. 158-160). While studies have not determined the effectiveness of face to face versus social media messages about food waste reduction, certainly during COVID-19 the dearth of public face-to-face interaction may have differently impacted the credibility of face-to-face and mediated publicity about food waste. For this reason, the increasing reliance on social media as a vehicle for information and identity

expression makes the use of apps for guidance in socially and environmentally conscientious behavior important to study.

Food, Technology, Materiality and Rhetorical Appeal

Bringing ideas about identity, responsibility, and convenience together, Isabel de Solier, in "Food and the Self," looked at humans' relationships to material life and food media in particular. De Solier studied middle class, white, foodies (people for whom food is a primary hobby and form of leisure) to better understand how they shaped their sense of self through procuring, preparing, and consuming food (13-15). For foodies, food is not purely functional, to feed the body, but a creative act (or form) one engages in as part of productive leisure. Moreover, this productive engagement with diversion is seen as a kind of professional and moral "leisure labor" toward becoming a better self (16-18). For many people who felt disconnected during the COVID-19 pandemic, creating and posting pictures of one's food, both synchronously and asynchronously, became productive leisure that went beyond one's identity as a foodie; these actions were communal in ways that complicated social media's role in neoliberal consumer culture (Chittal). Social media's currencies are both material and immaterial but, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, apps and social media platforms have mediated cultural identities via real and virtual food.

In another work, "Tasting the Digital," de Solier discussed the ways businesses use social media to generate understandings of contemporary food culture (63). Rather than advertising through commercial media, food businesses rely on consumers to post in their own social media about their food or dining experience. When consumers post about their food experiences, they build both a repertoire (bodily habits of being with and using technology) and an archive (a "place" to establish a record) that tells not only their story (Taylor 16-23), but references and builds an online library of preferred food businesses. Food intersects with our narratives of who we are, what we do, and how we eat via technology. These become a "regime of practices" that have their own codes, truths and differential impacts (power) on identities (Foucault 51-75). For many Gen Zers, the saying "Food eats first" (meaning you must take a picture and post about your food before you eat), is de rigueur, part of a social etiquette that demands food perform identity on social media sites. According to the industry study, "A New Generation to Feed," Instagram is the social media platform most often used by Gen Z to post

about food and to make decisions about what and where to eat. 75% of Gen Zers are on Instagram, as are 69% of all Millennials (5).

Via social media, food is relational, its value lying in our association with friends, influencers, and material things, as the matter through which meaning is made. Since food waste and recovery apps are a mediated technology that connect people to food and each other, analyzing the rhetorical appeals of these apps offers insight into their popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic and potential for continued use. In a moment when people seem simultaneously to be more conscious of food waste, and yet buying as much food as before the pandemic ("Food and Consumers"), food waste apps are positioned to resolve the moral dilemmas at the consumer end of the food chain resulting from overbuying (in stores and through delivery services), and at the production end through the diversion of excess supply or other pre-consumer food waste.

The data for my examination of the rhetorical appeal of two of the most popular food (anti-) waste and rescue apps consists of the organizations' websites, app sites on the AppStore and Google Play, media coverage of the apps, and comments submitted by app users. Rhetoric describes the ways language can be used to influence others' perceptions. My analysis of the apps' rhetorical appeal utilizes the Aristotelian concepts of ethos (ethics, character), pathos (appeals to empathy, sympathy and compassion) and logos (logic, substance, reasoning). I then extend this analysis outward to pay attention to how moral/ethical bodies and identities are implicated in food waste apps and how they are connected in material and immaterial ways to food and waste. Belasco's triad of identity, responsibility, and convenience (10-13) and de Solier's (10-13, 63) and others' focus on material culture and identity inform this analysis. In the analysis that follows, I examine each of the apps in turn, looking first at a global app that posts food to sell at a reduced rate (TGTG) and then at a popular food rescue app that solicits donors to donate and volunteers to recover otherwise wasted food (FRUS).

Too Good to Go (TGTG)

"Save Food. Help the Planet." In the last year, TGTG quickly has become the global leader in apps that sell discounted restaurant and other prepared food. Labeling itself "The World's #1 Anti-Waste App," TGTG already has several awards under its belt. The app won an Editor's choice award on the Apple App Store, a "World Changing Ideas" award from *Fast Company*, a "World Summit Award" from the

Austrian-based International Center for New Media (ICNM), in Germany it won a "Focus Innovation Award," and in Spain it won "The Award" for the best mobile app. It is notable that at the height of COVID-19 TGTG made the decision to expand to a dozen (and counting) large cities in the United States and 13 other countries. Once established in a city, TGTG employees promote the app and ask local restaurants and grocery stores to sign on to post their leftover food for discounted sale at the end of the day. Notably, those in rural or more suburban areas will not find much use for the app. Nonetheless, TGTG's reach has insured that it gets national and international press coverage, which has contributed to its popularity.

As of this writing, the app has been downloaded 46.3 million times in 14 different languages, and users can purchase food from 90,657 providers (restaurants, bakeries, and grocery stores) in 15 countries with 110 million meals saved globally since 2016. TGTG has 84,900 followers on Instagram, 557,200 followers on Facebook, and 692 on Twitter, with daily posts on all three platforms. Although the Copenhagen-based app came to the United States a little more than a year ago, in most cities where these discounted food/anti-waste apps are located (including NYC and Boston, where another large anti-waste app, Food for All, has its base), TGTG is the go-to app. Users are asked to view the map to" discover nearby stores," "search, filter and find your preferred store," and then "follow your favorite stores." Food providers place items they can no longer sell at regular price in a "surprise bag" to go for app customers. Now that the U.S. app has partnered with the Waze app (crowdsourced GPS), drivers everywhere can easily use TGTG with Waze to select and buy "surprise bags" of food, and then locate the restaurant or other provider and pick up their food.

While TGTG's economic appeal is prominent (e.g., "Start Saving Delicious Surplus Food at Great Prices!"), the app also emphasizes the social change aspect of food waste reduction. The majority of the website materials are devoted to the "movement" section, an educational portal handling topics like "what is food waste," "why is food wasted?," and "why is food waste a problem?" Users are also invited to become "food waste warriors," who will use the app on a regular basis and follow four basic guidelines: "1. Respect the mission," "2. Embrace the surprise," "3.Get creative," and "4. Plan ahead." The guidelines ask warriors to value reducing waste over the taste of the food that they purchase. This request is somewhat contradictory in that TGTG prioritizes the good taste of the food throughout their promotional materials and general app rhetoric.

Despite, or maybe due to, the appeal of the surprise bag, another possibility, verified in user comments, is that the food in the bag will go uneaten for a variety of reasons (too much, poor quality, user is allergic or vegan/vegetarian, food goes bad) thereby contributing to food waste further down the chain. While the purchase of surprise bags adds value/profit to food that businesses would otherwise throw out, the use of the app does not reduce the food produced by these businesses. Nonetheless, TGTG's tagline, "Eat well. Fight food waste" presents an obvious win-win for business and consumer. The emphasis on great food offers taste and quality at a discount. Unlike food shelter clients who receive otherwise wasted food, the monetary transaction confers "taste" on the consumer who is also fighting food waste, as opposed to shelter clients who are not presumed to be "food waste warriors" when they eat donated food.

Mirroring much of their appeal to consumers, TGTG offers potential food providers the opportunity to divert otherwise wasted food by selling those items at a reduced (usually by two thirds) price. As their website puts it, "We love welcoming new partners to the fight against food waste, and whatever your business, we can help you recuperate costs and lower your footprint - it's 100% good for you and the planet." During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the message has shifted to emphasize the economic support provided by the app at a time when restaurants and other food businesses are trying to compete and offer a full menu, even as the pandemic has greatly reduced patronage. To incentivize food businesses to become partners during the pandemic, at a time when food delivery apps have overtaken the market, TGTG offers home delivery in some cities and in others has partnered with Waze to facilitate pickup. As climate change and economic concerns have only increased during the pandemic, the message to providers is that they can raise public awareness of waste and increase the "green" profile of their business while increasing their bottom line.

Media coverage of the app far exceeds that of any of the other food waste apps, and many of the titles show an emphasis on economic appeal. A title from an article in *Fast Company* states, "This App Lets You Buy Whatever Food Your Favorite Restaurant has Leftover at the End of the Day." From *The Sun,* "GRUBS UP Woman Shares How She Nabbed Five Foot-long Subs, 15 Cookies, Four Oreo Cupcakes and Tonnes More for just £7." Titles from articles in *Fortune*, *Marketwatch*, the *Independent*, *The Guardian,* and others point to the ethical appeal of "fighting" food waste, and "eating sustainably" offered by the app. Finally,

there's the win-win angle, in titles such as this one from the *Thrillist*, "This App Is Tackling Food Waste By Scoring You a Better Meal."

Users gave the app an average 4.9 out of a possible 5 on the App Store (105,700 ratings) and a 4.8 on the Google Play store (646,178 Reviews). Several themes emerge from the reviews: quality of food in the "surprise bag" always a surprise (i.e., not consistent), lack of food providers, problems/glitches with the provider system, and the value of food for price. Most of the comments directly reflect an individual's experience with the app, with fewer comments about the value to people and the planet of fighting food waste and food insecurity by using TGTG. The following comment demonstrates the ambivalence found in many of the reviews:

> LOVE the concept but it's very YMMV [Your Mileage May Vary]. Half my orders get cancelled but that's better than showing up and there is no food to pick up. Very annoying if you've gone out of your way. You get charged automatically if the restaurant doesn't cancel the order with the app, which means you have to go complain to customer service. Have successfully completed 3 orders. one was as expected. one was amazing. and one was laughably bad. (Teresa Lu, September 14, 2021, 3 stars).

Reviewers seemed to negotiate between their identities as savvy consumer and advocate for food waste reduction, and it seemed the latter balanced out the former when the food was disappointing. However, whether the app was used once or twice as an experiment or incorporated into one's routine food purchasing was harder to evaluate.

TGTG places a heavy emphasis on the ethical impact of food waste in their marketing. Their impact statement reads: "We dream of a planet with no food waste, and every day we're working on making that a reality. Our app is the most direct way for you to get involved - just download, log on, and get saving perfectly good, surplus food from your local stores. It's always a surprise and an instant good deed for the planet." "Instant" good deeds done conveniently from your mobile device are now familiar rhetoric in charity appeals. For TGTG, however, the surface incentive may be altruism, but the underlying attraction of the app seems to be the opportunity to purchase large amounts of "good" food at greatly reduced prices. Guilt over wasting food was especially high amongst the middle class during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma et al.), and this too may have worked into TGTG's massive popularity. The designers position use of the app by the individual as a starting point for collective social change. The rhetoric and

performance of the app works as a quest or game, with habits of playing and keeping score well known to the user. For each surprise bag purchased, the user scores, with badges awarded as one purchases more and more bags. The rhetoric about the app is performative in tangible and intangible ways. As the user buys more leftover food, the app provides a convenient method to reduce guilt within a neoliberal frame of individual responsibility for excessive waste.

The appeal of good deeds done for self and planet raises the question, to what end? How does the story of fighting waste and heroes rescuing food in distress connect to a body of practices that become truths? How does the discourse make meaning of/create institutionalized knowledge about food waste, food insecurity, and the larger food system? The archetypal story of heroes and warriors fighting off evil to rescue the weak and vulnerable is universally recognized and hardly new, and its appeal has only grown during the pandemic. It is especially important to consider that this narrative is used by all sides of the political spectrum and on a variety of issues. Here it is easy to substitute waste for the evil the warrior must fight to "save the planet" and to note the ways emotions and morality are foregrounded. However, users' comments reflect practical assessments of the app for taste and economy more so than guilt reduction (pathos) or social and environmental issues (ethos). Nonetheless, during the COVID-19 pandemic the discourse seems especially to have hit its mark (to use more battle metaphors), at a time when much of the population feels helpless to manage their lives.

Food Rescue US (FRUS)

Unlike TGTG, FRUS is focused on reducing food insecurity while also reducing food waste. FRUS is the largest recovery platform and food rescue app of its type. The app connects volunteer drivers, food providers, and agencies for the donation and transport of otherwise-wasted food to agencies that can offer meals or to-go boxes for their clients. Once a person determines whether FRUS exists in their area (though they also invite you to start a chapter), they can sign up, scan their driver's license, indicate what forms of communication they prefer, general availability, and then receive a list of potential rescue sites and recipient agencies in their area. There is a gaming aspect to the app; colored boxes indicate numbers of rescues and meals delivered and volunteer rescuers with high numbers get badges (shown in a box at the top of the page).

FRUS's website states, "Using our simple and efficient proprietary technology, food donors register available fresh food, social service agencies communicate their food needs and details for delivery, and volunteers sign up for a 'food rescue.'" As with TGTG, numbers are prominent on the FRUS website. Currently located in 40 communities, they have, as of March 2022, provided 78 million meals and saved 102 million pounds of food from landfills. More to the purpose of the app, they have registered 12,000 volunteer food rescuers, with 1,200 agency partners, and 1,700 food providers. FRUS has a site director that coordinates and oversees each community where it rescues food, and advertises itself as fulfilling a niche for food rescue by rescuing smaller quantities of food from donors like restaurants that rescue agencies tend to avoid due to lack of resources.

For potential food donors, FRUS promotes the platform and app in several ways. The community responsibility angle is a thread throughout their materials: "Donate your excess food to end hunger and food waste in your community." The donor portion of the site highlights the tax deduction advantage gained when businesses donate food, and safety from liability through the Good Samaritan act, which protects donations made in good faith. Last, the site promises the widespread promotion of donors through its "robust publicity and social media programs." As they note, "Food Rescue US has presented a solution that is timely, flexible and effective and involves whole communities in the effort to reduce food waste and feed the hungry." In the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the message resonated with food businesses who had not previously considered the app. Suddenly, due to a combination of pandemic-related food supply chain problems, food rescue provided an outlet for community visibility at a time when food security issues were prominent. As one donor remarked, "[FRUS] has given our local shop a tremendous and much needed boost of support and optimism during these difficult times" ("COVID-19 Response").

Most of the media coverage of FRUS is informative, explaining how the app works and its ease of use. All coverage discusses how the app reduces food insecurity and food waste, with one article explaining further that the app "addresses overconsumption, encouraging people to donate what they've already grown or purchased, rather than adding more food into a system of waste" (DiBenedetto). Another article focused on how the use of smartphone technologies and crowdsourcing has made food donation and rescue more efficient, with more donations going to more recipient agencies and, ultimately, food insecure people (Allen). FRUS's own impact report from 2020 details the unique combination of

problems caused by a global pandemic: food insecurity has grown, and methane emissions have risen due to all the food thrown out in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. FRUS explained that, throughout the pandemic "our locations continued to rescue excess food and pivoted to launch emergency programs, like our Restaurant Meal Programs and Community Kitchens" ("Covid-19 Response").

I had viewed user comments on the Apple App Store prior to writing this article and was surprised to see that all comments on the App Store and Google play store were pulled as of August 2020. The "award-winning" app can now only be downloaded directly from the website. This change could be due to the decentralized nature of the organization, with local sites around the United States operating their own versions of the platform. I did find a few ratings and reviews on community news sites, Facebook, Great Nonprofits, VolunteerMatch, and Glassdoor. The reviews were all positive and referred to rescues and deliveries by local chapters of FRUS. The following, from a Miami site director, was typical, "During COVID, we added FREE meal distributions from local restaurants we funded to help feed the furloughed, unemployed and food insecure population impacted by COVID-19."

On the app site and webpage, FRUS positions the app as a way individuals can aid in reducing hunger and make a positive impact on the environment. Their tagline reads, "Be the Rescue. Fight hunger. Help the Planet." They describe their process on their website: "Our local volunteers pick-up excess healthy food from local food donors and deliver it directly to local social service agencies that feed the food insecure." The use of "healthy" to modify the food donated is somewhat ambiguous as it is not a requirement for donations, nor is nutritional quality measured by food rescuers or recipient agencies. The appeal of fighting hunger by rescuing food has grown as COVID-19 and other events have made food waste and the food supply chain a headline story. Additionally, during the shutdown, people with otherwise busy schedules found themselves at home with time and (for farms and many food businesses) food on their hands. In 2020 and 2021, FRUS offered a COVID-19 relief fund (based on donations) and partnered with state and local agencies to offer increased aid through relief initiatives. Through these and other efforts since the start of the pandemic, their funding and volunteer numbers expanded greatly, and they continued to rescue food and deliver it to recipient agencies when many local shelters with increasing numbers of clients were finding it difficult to access food.

Much as with TGTG, FRUS relies on the fact that many white, middle-class consumers feel both guilty about all the food wasted in the United States and overwhelmed by the wicked problems (with no easy solutions) of climate change and hunger. The overall message presented by FRUS's website and app is one of opportunity amidst crisis. The numbers spin upward as you scroll down the home page: number of meals provided, pounds of food diverted from the landfill, number of community sites, number of volunteers. Where TGTG offers the rhetoric of warriors fighting a battle by buying up waste, the fight that FRUS promotes is one of distribution: all we need to do is take unsellable food from food businesses and transport it to where it is most needed. FRUS offers a relatively easy way to make a difference locally by reducing hunger and diverting food waste from the landfill and globally by helping to reduce methane emissions. The emphasis in the discourse on the app, as with the food rescue movement in general, is that the two problems (food insecurity and food waste) are interrelated. During the COVID-19 pandemic, as supply chain problems, unemployment, labor shortages and food insecurity have been juxtaposed against each other in the news, the argument gains logical and ethical force.

The rhetoric of food waste reduction as a moral act was presented in each of the apps discussed and mirrors their media coverage and user comments. They also reflect the discourse of national and international food waste reduction campaigns (Arcuri, 265). More to the point, though, the apps speak to middle-class behavior, attitudes and ideas about waste as cultural performance, and our identification with food as (im)material substance. People are centered or marginalized based on the semiotics and the mobility of their nearness or distance from waste, how their body is positioned or made (in)visible with regard to cultural tastes and taboos. Food waste apps activate these relationships through the circulation and repetition of discourses about food waste reduction and the practices they allow. In other words, how a body interacts with waste and waste reduction apps depends a great deal on embodiment as well as the affordances and constraints technology provides to that body.

Conclusion

Food waste apps can run the gamut from programs that track food bought and used, apps that send reminders about perishable food so that it will be eaten, to those described in this paper. The two apps examined are designed to move discounted

or nonmarketable food from food businesses to people who may or may not eat it. The discourse on the websites and app sites studied neatly distinguishes those who can have taste from those designated to eat waste. The (anti-)food waste apps' emphases in their tag lines on taste and quality ("Great food should be tasted, not wasted," "Pay less, Save more, Tastes better," and "Eat well, Fight food waste") is part of a discourse of embodied choices, of options and a say over what you want to eat. In contrast, the rhetorical appeal of the FRUS food rescue app is not at all about taste and quality, but about quantity (millions of meals served, tons of food diverted from the landfill). These distinctions are not arbitrary, but part of a system of power wherein the right to choice and autonomy (over food, over bodily freedom) is conferred upon those who can participate in the "free" market. In the United States, citizen identities are in large part shaped by people's options as consumers, even as these options multiply or recede based on intersections with a person's race, gender, ethnicity, age, ability, etc.

As well, these discourses are part of a regime of practices (Foucault 54-60) that allow people, especially progressive, white, middle-class people, to cope with guilt over the in/visibility of food waste. If one lesson of the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic was that food waste could not be hidden, the *usefulness* of food waste apps has been evident in the control they provide over seemingly intractable problems. It is notable that both apps' websites and latest impact reports quoted the rise in both food waste and food insecurity during the pandemic as further proof of the importance of their platform. The message to the potential donor, consumer or volunteer is, "use this app and you will be part of the solution."

Importantly, this use is part of a habit or practice with media and technology that is performative. The gaming aspect of both apps also speaks to productive leisure, which combines entertainment and productivity. Bourdieu might label the usefulness of the apps to some bodies over others *habitus* (165-170), while McLuhan would emphasize the extra-discursive immersion of bodies and media technologies over the rhetoric provided about the apps themselves (Cavell 10-13). More than locating meaning in the medium or the message, however, this paper has argued that food waste apps shape identities and influence behaviors in relation to their usefulness. That usefulness is heightened by our recognition of the problems of food waste and insecurity, with awareness supported by policy, media campaigns, local food drives, and trash and recycling ordinances.

The way problems are framed determines the inclusion of certain solutions at the expense of others. By selecting, frames call attention to particular facets of

reality, thus diverting attention away from others (Entman 51-5). Although the apps analyzed in this paper perhaps differ in their motives, their overall goals are similar: to make food more accessible and reduce food waste. While each has been remarkably successful, particularly during the social isolation and economic upheaval caused by COVID-19, based on user comments and media coverage there is no compelling evidence that the anti-food waste app, TGTG has made "great" food more accessible to people with limited means (Yoder). Food discount apps do allow for some experimentation that might not happen should the food be too expensive, and TGTG adds the element of "surprise." Similarly, these "anti-waste" apps likely have reduced food waste headed for the landfill, but they have not changed the overproduction of food in the United States that allows (or demands, based on a consumer aesthetic of overabundance) restaurants and other food providers to have so much leftover at the end of the day. Likewise, the FRUS app makes it easy to volunteer and facilitates the rescue of food otherwise headed for the landfill. These are laudable goals, though subject to similar critique in that food rescue addresses neither the reasons for the overproduction of food in the United States or the deeper issues underlying the growing problem of food insecurity.

Sabrina Arcuri argues that redistribution of otherwise wasted food is discursively positioned in public policy, media, and nonprofit campaigns as achieving perfect circularity in the food system (265). Nothing produced gets wasted, circular economists and policy makers assure, because hungry people can eat the waste. Diversion of food waste from the landfill in one instance may not prevent waste from happening elsewhere in the food chain. Overproducing food and then selling even perfectly delicious leftovers at a discount or donating it to a food bank or shelter may be kicking the can down the road if people do not like or cannot eat it. More importantly, excessive production and excessive consumption as core problems remain unexamined, mostly because they present difficult obstacles to the free-market system and the inequities embedded therein. Apps designed to reduce food waste and food insecurity are an important step toward awareness of problems that cannot be solved through rescuing food for the food insecure or through individual purchases of discounted food. During the COVID-19 pandemic their benefits have perhaps been as performative as material: users can be heroes and warriors fighting the good fight for food and against waste at a time when there seems to be little else people, as citizens and consumers, can control.

I remain an ambivalent food rescuer, although without the aid of food waste apps. I try to find alternatives to redistribution of excess as a solution to food waste, while recognizing its immediate appeal. I work with community food networks and on cooperative farms to learn about the cycle of food production, distribution and consumption on local levels, and my responsibility and relationship to this food system we all are a part of. None of us are singularly to blame for food waste, although our/my relative privileges of consumption in the United States are intimately connected to environmental destruction. Food waste reduction technologies provide guidelines for practices that may be useful to us in tangible and intangible ways, but we must interrogate that usefulness in relation to our embeddedness in larger cycles of over production and consumption.

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"You Are a Bright Light in These Crazy Times": The Rhetorical Strategies of #BakeClub that Counter Pandemic Isolation and Systemic Racism

ASHLEY M. BEARDSLEY

On March 23, 2020, Christina Tosi, pastry chef and owner of the renowned New York City bakery Milk Bar, asked her Instagram followers if they wanted to join her baking club ("#baking club starts"). Since then, Tosi has been baking and leading what she calls Bake Club on Instagram Live at 2 p.m.[1] When Bake Club members (known as Bake Clubbers) look back, 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic will be memorialized through photos of food posted on Instagram, which trigger the taste of a countless number of cookies, the relationships such food allowed us to develop, and the unique ways – like exchanging recipes and learning to be more creative in the kitchen – that food connected us to other people through mostly virtual interactions. As a card-carrying Bake Clubber,[2] I watched, baked, and wondered how the group developed a collective home baker identity for its members, the importance of this identity, and what this community formation teaches us about food and activism. This article attempts to understand how cooking, food, a celebrity chef, and a hashtag foster parasocial relationships (those that might not occur in person) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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[1] As of April 2022, Tosi still hosts Bake Club, though it is once a week instead of daily.

[2] I have participated since day one and am an active member. The use of the first person in this article reflects my community involvement.

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More specifically, a study of cooking on social media offers new insights into how women[3] use food rhetorically to form communities, promote learning, and to participate in a form of activism. According to Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, hashtags, which are user-generated, "have become the default method to designate collective thoughts, ideas, arguments, and experiences that might otherwise stand alone or be quickly subsumed" (xxvii). Though Jackson and colleagues specifically examine hashtag activism on Twitter – how groups and supporters use hashtags to "advocate for social change, identity redefinition, and political inclusion" (xxviii) – their use on Instagram serves the same function. Ultimately, I argue that Tosi takes a feminist rhetorical approach that "focuses on the rights, contributions, expertise, opportunities, and histories of marginalized groups," using baking to combat the pandemic and systemic racism (Glenn 3). Tosi uses Instagram to form what I define as a "feminist food community": a group where members use food to (1) construct a collective home baker identity through the active creation and sharing of content; (2) view learning as integral to community participation; and (3) combat social inequalities linked to racism.

During the pandemic, #BakeClub connected bakers across the United States. For example, Bake Clubber Kelly[4] says Instagram has been a lifeline: "I post more frequently, interact with a lot more people I haven't met in real life, and it's less of like, here's an update on my life and more of like, here's something cool I have to share" (Personal interview). Indeed, for many people like Kelly, sharing photos of baked goods formed connections, built community around food, and provided an escape from the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. This led me to ask: what are the rhetorical moves such online pandemic baking communities use to construct an inclusive community; how does cooking and posting about it on social media ward off the pandemic's isolating effects; and how is baking used as social activism?

To answer these questions, I use Bake Club as a case study and analyze Instagram posts and personal interviews to understand how the group formed, why members participated, and its role in participants' lives during the first five months of the pandemic. In a way, the COVID-19 pandemic and #BakeClub offer a time-

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[3] Throughout this article, "women" refers to anyone who is female-identifying.

[4] Kelly is one of nine women I interviewed. Thanks to all the interviewees and Bake Clubbers for supporting me. Additionally, thank you to Will Kurlinkus and Katie DeLuca for your encouragement and feedback throughout the writing process.

lapse view applicable to studying how women use social media to form feminist food communities under more normal circumstances.

Creating Food Communities through Parasocial Relationships

To understand how food communities in general form, I begin with research about celebrity chefs. According to Kelsi Matwick and Keri Matwick, "[c]elebrity chefs construct themselves as authorities in cooking but at the same time as authentic and real to viewers" (2). The authenticity and interactions between the celebrity chef and the audience develop intimate relationships as the ordinariness associated with sharing recipes mimics interactions that often occur when exchanging recipes in person. Furthermore, celebrity chefs cultivate relationships between the host and viewers, shaping what Matt Hills defines as parasocial interaction, or "a type of *imagined* rather than co-present social relationship" (463, emphasis in original). These parasocial relationships use media to "give the illusion" of an in-person relationship with the celebrity, including celebrity chefs (Horton and Wohl qtd. in Hills 464). For instance, celebrity chef Rachael Ray uses storytelling to present "herself as ordinary and relatable," to reach her viewers (Matwick and Matwick 58). While current scholarship emphasizes celebrity chefs on television, this article adds to research on food and parasocial relationships by examining how social media furthers bonds created specifically during a global pandemic that limited in-person interactions.

Indeed, social media sites fulfill a need for belonging when individuals feel ostracized (Iannone et al. 491). Although Iannone and colleagues focus on people who feel excluded, their findings apply to the needs of belonging felt during the pandemic. Bake Clubbers, for example, often receive "likes," comments, or reposts from Tosi and other members that develop relationships. These interactions helped women stay connected beyond the home during COVID-19-mandated quarantines, despite only knowing each other online. Through "likes," members share information, establish bonds, and convey support (Carr et al.). As Bake Clubbers comment on each other's posts, these relationships grow, structuring learning as integral to community participation.

Thus, parasocial relationships develop between celebrity chefs and fans. For example, studying fans of food shows, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Lauhona Ganguly argue that "self-identified fans may have more motivation to watch food television shows, which could drive repeated returns and continuous exposure to

content" (71). So as virtual pandemic cooking took off, fans gravitated toward familiar chefs like Tosi to guide them in their kitchen. Reinhard and Ganguly demonstrate how food moves from television to social media as fans engage with related content, including following chefs' social media accounts (77). However, the authors examine traditional broadcast shows (e.g., *Barefoot Contessa, MasterChef,* etc.), leaving a gap in research regarding fan interactions between chefs, like Tosi, that film and distribute cooking content on social media.

Furthermore, chefs using social media often develop microcelebrity status, which Alice E. Marwick explains as "a mindset and set of practices in which the audience is constructed as a fan base" (333). Notably, microcelebrity enhances our understanding of how watching people cook strengthens parasocial relationships. For instance, the YouTube cooking channel associated with the popular food and lifestyle magazine *Bon Appétite* (*BA*)[5] is an example of wildly successful microcelebrities. Host Brad Leone, who has been with *BA* since 2011, has over 800 thousand Instagram followers and practices microcelebrity through directly addressing fans, dismantling the separation between chef and viewer. Tosi similarly uses her microcelebrity status to build parasocial relationships with Bake Clubbers but complicates Marwick's understanding of practitioners seeing "their audience as fans" by calling Bake Clubbers family (337). Although Tosi's microcelebrity chef status certainly attracted participants and meant that she received attention from mainstream media outlets like *HuffPost* and *The New Yorker*, Bake Club evolved into a familial space as members built relationships beyond baking at 2 p.m.

Analyzing Instagram Posts and Conducting Interviews through a Feminist Lens

To understand how Bake Club became a significant community during the COVID-19 pandemic and evolved into a feminist food community that uses food to promote the active creation and sharing of baking, learn to be more creative, and address systemic racism, I analyzed Instagram posts beginning with day one (March 24,

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[5] While *BA* significantly contributes to the conversation on microcelebrity, in June 2020, Test Kitchen assistant editor Sohla El-Waylly revealed that BIPOC colleagues were not receiving equal pay. As a result, by October 2020, ten chefs announced their departure from *BA*.

2020)[6] and interviewed nine active members. Using a two-cycle qualitative coding method, I first developed descriptive codes to collect the posts' content. Then, I inductively coded posts to identify patterns and participation levels. Finally, I chose interview participants from the members who participated since March and posted images of their bakes at least once a week or commented on posts. At first, my analysis stopped with day sixty-nine because on June 1, 2020, Tosi announced that she was pausing to address concerns of systemic racism after the murder of George Floyd ("I started"). I thought Bake Club would cease to exist at that point; however, the pause drives Tosi to question how her whiteness and inaction contribute to systemic racism and how she can use her microcelebrity as allyship.

Though food can further what Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston call "hegemonic feminine ideals" (like using food as care-work), it is also associated with joy, pleasure, and social justice. The women Cairns and Johnston interview express joy through self-care and the "embodied pleasures of cooking," deemphasizing the role feeding others plays (151-2). Additionally, the authors explore how women change the food system by leading community food projects, demonstrating that food provides pleasure, serves as resistance, and noting that pleasure and activism are not inherently separate (153). Indeed, the prolific writer and Black feminist adrienne maree brown recognizes how, taken together, pleasure and activism use joy to "bring about social and political change" and center "pleasure and joy as resistance" (10; 432). Initially, Tosi designed Bake Club to find joy and pleasure in food to combat pandemic isolation; however, analyzing posts after the Bake Club pause provides insights into how Tosi incorporates self-reflection. This move is integral to Bake Club and feminist food communities because it demonstrates how they use rhetorical feminism to reflect and self-correct (Glenn 4). So, to understand food's role during the pandemic and how feminist food communities form, this article uses my participation as a Bake Clubber alongside posts and interviews with two members – Elaine and Kelly – and Tosi's Instagram Live videos and posts. After inductively coding the nine interviews, I determined that Elaine and Kelly represent two diverse types of Bake Clubbers: members who did not post on Instagram before the pandemic (Elaine) and members who follow the hashtag but do not post daily (Kelly). Significantly, zooming in on two Bake Clubbers with

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[6] I hoped to interview at least five members. After qualitatively coding Instagram posts, I sent direct messages to ten active members, only one of whom did not reply. So I moved ahead with the nine interviews to better understand the community.

different participation styles for this article allowed me to provide an in-depth analysis of how digital food communities form parasocial relationships.

Meet Elaine and Kelly. The first participant, Elaine, is a stay-at-home mom with school-age kids who began posting on Instagram as a pandemic-inspired activity. However, it is not until day twenty-six that she posts about Bake Club as an activity where you can participate even if you don't have the exact ingredients ("Christina Tosi's Baking Club"). Bake Club's adventurous baking style is an important design feature because it emphasizes accessibility and interactivity as central to learning. Elaine became one of the most active members throughout the pandemic, commenting on #BakeClub posts and participating during the Bake Club pause. Overall, Elaine represents members who started posting on Instagram and using the hashtag to combat the isolation of the pandemic and replace in-person gatherings with a virtual community.

The second participant, Kelly, is a freelance musician who enjoys finding creative activities overall. She began using Instagram in 2012 to share pictures, and she represents Bake Clubbers who baked on day one. Before Bake Club, Kelly enjoyed following Tosi and watching her judge *MasterChef* and *MasterChef Junior* because her energy is fun, and you can learn a lot from her media appearances. The authenticity Kelly picks up on is a crucial attribute of microcelebrities, and it strengthens her parasocial relationship with Tosi (Marwick 344). Though Kelly does not post daily, she watches the videos live and likes posts, representing those who show up to learn and foster parasocial relationships.

Using Food to Connect in Times of Isolation

Perhaps the primary reason women are attracted to food communities on social media is that they are looking to collaborate through the embodied interactivity of cooking. The need for connection, ultimately heightened during the pandemic, leads participants to search for shared activities to bond over. For example, on day seven, Tosi acknowledges that she sees what viewers share: "Caramel sauce yesterday, y'all. You crushed it. I saw some really great ideas. Chai tea caramel: I would 100% get down with that" ("Baking Club: Day 7" 00:01:19–00:01:29). Tosi uses "strategic intimacy to appeal to followers," building Bake Club's parasocial relationships (Marwick 333). Even though Tosi provides the caramel recipe, she shows she sees members' variations, practicing microcelebrity by interacting with them (e.g., "liking" their Instagram posts and recognizing contributions at the

beginning of videos). Her acknowledgment establishes that participants contribute valuable knowledge. Indeed, recognizing variations from others is central to creating the social context of recipe sharing, which, according to Susan J. Leonardi, makes recipes embedded discourse because they are designed to be exchanged. In this section, we will see how parasocial relationships form through the act of "liking" and commenting on posts, thus using recipe sharing as an embedded food practice to build community.

Creating Community through Hashtags, Comments, and "Likes." To connect, Tosi and members use the group's hashtag, #BakeClub, tagging content and demonstrating how images are "used for 'sharing and communicating significant social experiences'" (Leaver and Highfield qtd. in Leaver et al. 70). #BakeClub allows members to archive their creative process and embrace the platform's "social sharing opportunities" (Leaver et al. 66). For instance, if I am looking for baking inspiration, I can browse #BakeClub, find a recipe/post from another Bake Clubber, and engage with it by commenting, "liking," or making it. The use of "likes," which are "the frequently used one-click tools" on social media platforms such as Facebook's thumbs up icon, further members' parasocial relationships (Hayes et al., "When Nobody" 1). "Liking," which is represented on Instagram by a heart, allows Bake Clubbers to express "social support" (Carr et al. 390). Through hashtags, comments, and "likes," women use digital food communities to cultivate relationships that support one another by learning to bake and developing a shared home baker identity during COVID-19.

Frequently, Bake Clubbers comment on ingredient choice and baking success to encourage home bakers. On day fifty-five, for instance, members converse about their icebox cakes, and it is the positive interactions on posts that celebrate bonding, ward off isolation, and develop a communal baking identity.[7] For example, @ailisilia gets "extra credit" for incorporating previous bakes, and @bethany.hopes tells her that "Using the Greta was a pro move! 🔥" Like Tosi's choose-your-own-adventure approach to baking, the interactions between members exemplify how women interact in digital food communities via comments to build parasocial relationships alongside baking skills.

In particular, Kelly uses Bake Club as a space to connect through "liking" and contributes to the community in a way that remediates the "dual authorship" of

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[7] Trolls comment during the live stream; however, community members keep interactions positive by mentioning ingredients, steps, or something they like about the recipe.

handwritten recipe cards that provide where the recipe came from and include notes that might differ from the original (Cognard-Black 36). For example, my mom's recipe card for "Calico Bean Bake," a signature summer potluck dish growing up, demonstrates traditional dual authorship by including the recipe's origin ("Pat 1994") in the top right-hand corner and noting her customizations. Instead of rewriting the recipe, she crosses out ingredients she does not use (apple cider vinegar and dry mustard), adds that she does not "drain the beans," and indicates that the recipe can be doubled to make "a large crockpot batch!" Kelly and other Bake Clubbers make similar adjustments when posting their bakes, highlighting member interactions alongside baking knowledge.

On day 138, for instance, Kelly attributes the recipe creator at the beginning of the post by tagging Tosi: "@christinatosi." Then, she notes that her Milk Bar Pie, a well-known Tosi creation, deviates from the original recipe, using peanut butter cookies for the crust instead of oatmeal. Finally, she explains that she finishes it by adding a crème brûlée-style topping of caramelized sugar but that it has "OG" Milk Bar Pie filling ("@christinatosi #bakeclub Choose"). From handwritten cards to Instagram posts, what's important here is that social media expands traditional recipe exchange and continues to acknowledge that recipes utilize collaborative authorship. Through citing the source, experimenting and documenting changes, and circulating recipes, Bake Clubbers embrace co-authorship that's unique to cooking but limited during the pandemic.

Like Kelly's modification of written recipes in her Instagram post, the interactions between members, in general, elicit emotional and social gratification through "liking." According to Hayes and colleagues, receiving "likes" makes the poster feel happy and contributes to maintaining parasocial relationships ("One Click" 180). Indeed, Bake Clubbers use hashtags and "likes" to follow one another and satisfy the need to connect during the pandemic. Though commenting and "liking" might seem like passive interactions, they "are significant rhetorical engagements" used by women on social media and demonstrate active participation (DeLuca). Additionally, "liking" an Instagram post is a form of recipe annotation that acknowledges that the recipe has been shared and seen, developing the recipe creator's confidence and building a collective home baker identity. Thus, even if they don't comment on the post, Bake Clubbers' interactions create an empowering community through recipe sharing. Though some posts receive as few as ten likes and others have fifty or more, this simple act strengthens members' relationships.

The Impact of Sharing Ordinary Moments During the Pandemic. While a significant purpose of Bake Club is shifting the in-person exchange of recipes and food online, the parasocial relationships between members and Tosi captured via #BakeClub construct a space where they can cope with COVID-19 through posting, sharing joy, and member interactions. For example, Elaine says her posts aren't just for her followers: "They don't really care that I missed a day. But it's more for my ritual. It's more for my sanity. I'm nervous that if I don't have this every day, something to do, that I might feel lost, and it's just a meditative everyday thing" (Personal interview). In a way, posting about cooking on social media takes the form of journaling for Elaine. According to Lee Humphreys, women write in personal diaries to document "the daily activities, musing, and reflections on the events of the day," and often share their writing with friends and family (31). Notably, sharing diaries highlights the importance of women's everyday activities and ways of knowing. Like diaries, Bake Clubbers compose social media posts to share experiences because "knowing the daily routines and events of someone's life can build intimacy between people" (Humphreys 46), which became crucial to combating the pandemic's isolation as women took on additional caretaking responsibilities or were unable to interact with friends and family in person.

On day forty-one, for example, Elaine mentions "sharing the joy of @christinatosi #BakeClub" by delivering candied nuts to neighbors ("Christina Tosi Baking Club: Sweet"). The simple act of sharing food keeps Elaine active, gives her an activity she uses for self-care, and posting about it situates and connects her to the surrounding world because cooking provides a "connection to our sense of self, to others, to places, to specific times in rather concrete ways" that the pandemic limited (Abarca 104). When Elaine posts on Instagram, she demonstrates how she participates in the Bake Club community to spread joy despite the loss of activity outside of the home, modeling how digital food communities use parasocial relationships to pull members out of complacency or, in this case, isolation. Despite social distancing restrictions, Bake Club maintained that sharing food was an essential component of memory, creativity, and well-being that contribute to members' building and maintaining a home baker identity.

Indeed, anthropologists like David E. Sutton claim that "food does not simply symbolize social bonds and divisions; it participates in their creation and recreation," thus playing a more prominent role in forming an identity for individuals and groups (102). So, as the pandemic limited in-person opportunities to connect through food, Tosi and Bake Clubbers maintain food's social qualities

when "sharing" food by posting on Instagram and dropping off goodies for neighbors. Tosi models this sharing after day four when she posts a video leaving bags of meringues on her neighbor's porch with the caption "Q: what do you do with all your #bakingclub[8] treats?" Her action demonstrates how, even during quarantine, food is a way to connect and care for one another, and this moment is the beginning of the group's pleasure activism. "Pleasure is the point," says brown, and "[w]e can gift it to each other in a million ways: with authentic presence, abundant care, and honesty...[and] with delicious food" (441).

For Kelly in particular, food is a pleasurable and therapeutic experience. "When she's [Tosi] like, I'm gonna do this Bake Club, and you can just join, I was like, cool, I'm in for whatever it's gonna be, and I know that baking is going to be a positive strengthening kind of a thing," she says (Personal interview). Because of her creative mindset, Kelly knew that baking could help her cope with quarantining. Indeed, seeing baking as self-care and therapy was common during the pandemic. For instance, Sarah Weinberg posits that baking uses mindfulness as self-care. "When you're baking," says Weinberg, "you can't help but be engaged." The engagement helps bakers focus on the activity at hand and, in the end, there is a tangible result in the form of a baked good. In addition, Weinberg explains that posting about baking on social media is part of therapeutic, mindful baking because you can tap into a community of other people sharing a similar interest. Bake Clubbers use baking as mindfulness, embodying brown's pleasure activism principles through emphasizing paying attention to the process and "tuning" into actions that bring happiness, satisfaction, and joy (14).

Indeed, finding community and friendship through the creative baking process emphasizes the joy Tosi and the community bring. When she receives her Bake Club card in the mail, for instance, Kelly posts to express her joy and gratitude for Tosi, saying, "you are a bright light in these crazy times, and baking with you has brought many a joyful moment to our home these past months" ("Look who is"). Like Elaine, Kelly documents her Bake Club participation to focus on the joy she experiences by counteracting the pandemic's isolation and embracing the community as a space for pleasure activism.

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[8] Tosi and Bake Club used #BakingClub to tag posts until day thirty-three. Then, Tosi began using #BakeClub instead.

Employing Food as Pleasure Activism

If the primary reason for participating is collaborating and building parasocial relationships through embodied interactivity (cooking), the secondary reason women are attracted to digital food communities during the pandemic is that they provide the opportunity to come together over a shared goal. Tosi designed this digital food community to empower members, whether they are fighting loneliness or raising awareness of a particular social issue. Over months of baking, Bake Club evolves into a feminist food community where sharing content and learning are integral components to combating systemic racism. Indeed, using #BakeClub, members compose posts that contribute to finding joy and combatting the pandemic's isolation, but we also use food as "pleasure activism," which is "the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy" (brown 13). Through pleasure activism, we organize "around what we long for rather than what we are against" (brown 278). Though participating in Bake Club is a privileged activity because it requires time, equipment, and ingredients, Tosi's approach to running her bakeries and building communities uses food as pleasure activism.

The idea that baking is a "transformative" act is central to Tosi's creation of Milk Bar and community spaces ("About"). Although she does not use the word feminist as part of her microcelebrity persona, feminism is at the center of Tosi's empire as she builds bakeries where "we learn how to be respectful in how we respect each other as people and how we respect one another's opinions" ("The 'Scary' Enthusiasm" 00:25:34-00:25:48). In this final section, I highlight how Tosi shifts Bake Club from combatting pandemic isolation to use what brings her pleasure and joy – baking together – to address systemic racism and amplify the work of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) during and beyond the pandemic.

"In an Effort to Do My Part": Using #BakeClub to Amplify BIPOC Voices. For the first sixty-nine days of Bake Club, Tosi's goal was to use Instagram to spread "posi vibes." Additionally, social media platforms, explains Zizi Papacharissi, "sustain activities that are organized around information sharing and learning, creativity and innovation, and discourse" (121). Indeed, participants like Elaine see Bake Club as a space for discourse and positive community interaction: "Everyone has nothing but wonderful things to say, to lift each other up…we are all supporting each other. Everything's gonna be okay" (Personal interview). Here, Elaine

acknowledges Bake Club's supportive network is essential, but even though positivity grounds the community, that does not mean conflicts do not arise. Though "likes" foster positive interactions (and comments on Tosi's posts promote positivity), the tone shifts after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.

Four days after a Minneapolis police officer murdered Floyd, comments on Tosi's Bake Club day sixty-nine post reflect the turmoil felt across the United States as protests in support of Black lives began. Unlike the previous sixty-eight days where Bake Clubbers express excitement about baking and ask questions about ingredients, comments call out Tosi's silence and white privilege. They also shame her for not acknowledging systemic racism or using her platform to "speak out about the horrors of this week" (Tosi "#bakeclub day 69"). The response to Tosi's inaction depicts a common occurrence in digital spaces (Jackson et al.). Up to this point, #BakeClub brought bakers together to combat pandemic isolation; however, connecting around shared interests does not inherently lead to civic engagement. In fact, sharing "personalized interests" can enable "people to connect around commonalities without having to compromise their own belief systems" (Papacharissi 128). Indeed, Bake Club attracts members whose motivation to participate is pandemic-driven, and of the nine interview participants, only two don't identify as white. Interviewees mentioned they started baking along because it was fun, gave them something to do, and acted as a distraction from politics,[9] but Tosi decides she can't remain silent and her acknowledgment of racism begins to "register" its presence (Ahmed 34).

At the beginning of Bake Club day sixty-nine, Tosi says, "what we do here every day is light, it's light-hearted, it's full of joy. It's meant to be an escape, yet also a togetherness, but I just couldn't jump into Bake Club without first acknowledging what's going on in our country at large and especially this weekend" (00:00:49-00:01:10). Her introduction to the day's video shows that, while she is not questioning her privilege to continue baking as a white microcelebrity, she recognizes her inaction. Still, baking's pleasure at this moment resists the pandemic rather than systemic racism as she leads us in making lemon ice. However, instead of going live at 2 p.m. on June 1, 2020, she shares an image of a handwritten note that says, "I've decided to pause Bake Club for now, and instead I am digging in. I ask, I listen, I learn" ("I started").

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[9] I have summarized the responses from all interviewees to respect their anonymity.

The post is still problematic because Tosi's statement does not indicate any actionable items and can be viewed as "performative allyship," which Jackson and colleagues explain as "announcing or demonstrating allyship for an audience" (154-5). So what would she be learning by not hosting Bake Club? More importantly, what would she be doing? In stepping back, Tosi demonstrates how digital food communities can use rhetorical feminism to evolve into a feminist food community that operates "in a constate state of response, reassessment, and self-correction" (Glenn 4). Perhaps Tosi could've kept Bake Club going while asking, listening, and learning, but the decision to stop and dedicate her energy to support Black lives cultivates an awareness of how inaction contributes to racism and embraces the idea that "to become a feminist is to stay a student" (Ahmed 11).

During the pause, members kept baking and maintained parasocial relationships through the hashtag, and we couldn't be sure Bake Club would return. So the email newsletter Tosi sent on June 18, 2020 announcing Bake Club's restart on June 21 was a warm welcome (*Sunday*). Tosi says she wants to "share the microphone" and that she "can think of no better way to be reminded that the things that bring us together are more important than the things that try to tear us apart" than to restart Bake Club. From this email, it is not clear how it will be different. What will it look like for Tosi to highlight "new voices, new perspectives" during our baking sessions? It remained to be seen if #BakeClub and the community overall would move beyond performative support. Generally, "hashtags that claim to move privileged members of society toward solidarity with those less so," explain Jackson and colleagues, "are often regarded with skepticism as a kind of faux allyship that recenters privileged groups" (156). Thus, I awaited Bake Club's return with skepticism. To restart, Tosi reads us a note that Bake Clubber Kathleen sent her during the pause:

> We [Kathleen and her son Eli] talked about her [Tosi's] decision to put Bake Club on hiatus during these tumultuous times when our country's systemic racism has once again senselessly cost another Black life. Tough conversation to have with any kid. Tougher so between a white mom and her Black son. He's disappointed and doesn't really get why we can't bake and fight racism. So, we'll continue to do both. ("Bake Club: Day 70" 00:04:20-00:04:45)

After sharing, Tosi tells us that she and her Milk Bar team are actively working toward change and participated in the first #BakersAgainstRacism bake sale.[10] Bake Club's first day back acknowledges what Tosi is working on, but when Kathleen and her sons Jonah and Eli join Tosi in the kitchen on day seventy-four, she employs pleasure activism to use food to center "pleasure and joy as resistance" through the inclusion of voices other than her own (brown 432). With the addition of guests after the pause, Tosi moves from saying she is acting to showing her support and shifts the call for social awareness from pandemic isolation to systemic racism.

As Leaver and others explain, groups on Instagram "use the platform to raise social awareness for various causes in a more accessible manner," and Tosi uses her microcelebrity status with over 500 thousand Instagram followers to share the work of diverse makers (151). After Jonah, Eli, and Kathleen, Tosi collaborates with fashion designer Tan France, Milk Bar's communications coordinator Meme Wilson, Jade (a student at Food & Finance High School in New York City), and cookbook author and food editor Kristina Gill. Post-pause, adding voices, specifically BIPOC voices, becomes a central focus. For example, Tosi announces an additional weekly Bake Club segment called Teach Me Something where she does her "part in uplifting and amplifying Black and POC [sic] voices" by asking a friend to join and teach us (*August 2: Week 15*). The weekly collaborations vary in style, but Tosi uses Instagram to promote guests and encourage Bake Clubbers to follow their social media accounts.

Several Teach Me Somethings include a video posted to Tosi's YouTube channel and #TakeoverTuesday, where she gives her Instagram account over to the guest to post and share stories. Post-pause, Tosi uses her platform for "supportive organizing" for racial justice (Jackson et al. 154). For example, when Tosi collaborates with Austin, TX-based chef Tavel Bristol-Joseph for the first Teach Me Something, he teaches us how to bake his six-ounce "Monster Cookies" and shares where his determination and creativity come from:

> I grew up in Georgetown, Guyana, and was trying to figure out where I
> wanted to be […] I used to bake for punishment because I played basketball
> all the time, and anytime I would be out playing ball, she [my aunt] would

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[10] #BakersAgainstRacism brought bakers of all skill levels, from home cooks to professionals, together to sell their baked goods on June 20, 2020, and donate the proceeds to an organization supporting Black lives. As a result, over 2,000 bakers worldwide created limited edition baked goods to raise funds to fight systemic racism.

> try to get me to come home early, and I would want to stay out late, so her
> punishment was you're gonna bake with me every Saturday for the kids in
> Sunday school…and then it just kind of […] turned into this really fun thing
> to do with my aunt every Saturday. (00:03:24-00:06:50)

The story Bristol-Joseph tells is similar to the one published in *Food & Wine*
announcing his Best New Chef 2020 award (Shah). When he won this award, his
first restaurant, Emmer & Rye, had been open for five years, but despite his Austin-
based success, Bristol-Joseph does not have the same level of fame as Tosi.
However, by using her platform to circulate Bristol-Joseph's work, Tosi uses
storytelling to "help sustain movements that may yield political impact of a specific
form" (Papacharissi 132). In this case, bringing Bristol-Joseph into the kitchen
works to combat racial injustice by decentering Tosi's voice and calling on Bake
Clubbers to use the pleasure that baking Monster Cookies brings them to learn
about BIPOC bakers.

Furthermore, Tosi's #TakeoverTuesday strategically uses social media to
advocate for social change, holding up food-inspired pleasure and joy as resistance
as guests share their work via her Instagram Stories. Originally designed to
disappear within twenty-four hours, users can choose to archive "a collection of
themed Story segments" and post them on their profile as Stories Highlights
(Leaver et al. 28). Tosi uses this feature to create a space for BIPOC makers to share
and preserve their work. Some guests, like Bristol-Joseph, record themselves to
show us their work and capture their story as a cohesive video, while others utilize
still images with captions and animated text. For example, the Stories Highlight for
Lee Lee's Rugelach takeover includes six segments that feature the story of the
bakery's owner, Alvin Lee Smalls, and images of rugelach alongside the cakes and
cookies sold at the Harlem bakery (Tosi "Lee Lee's"). Like Jackson and others
point out in their analysis of hashtags and allies, Tosi's incorporation of
#TakeoverTuesday seeks to recognize her positionality and privilege and use her
microcelebrity to circulate BIPOC narratives. Tosi works to diversify
representation in the food industry through social media and encourages her fans to
seek out and support the guests' content.

Conclusion: Parasocial Relationships and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Though Christina Tosi is not the first microcelebrity chef to use food to build digital
communities, this analysis uncovers the rhetorical strategies women in an online

baking group (Bake Club) utilized to combat pandemic isolation, expanding scholarship on food and parasocial relationships. Hashtags, comments, and "likes" warded off pandemic isolation while teaching Bake Clubbers baking skills. Additionally, my analysis introduces how microcelebrities and digital food communities use Instagram to advocate for social change and evolve into feminist food communities that use food to (1) construct a collective home baker identity through the active creation and sharing of content; (2) view learning as integral to community participation; and (3) combat social inequalities linked to racism. Led by Tosi, Bake Clubbers like Elaine and Kelly created a community through #BakeClub. Ultimately, sharing food via Instagram establishes ways to exchange recipes and food during the pandemic that emphasizes baking as a form of pleasure activism. Though Tosi initially designed Bake Club to bring happiness, satisfaction, and joy during a time of uncertainty, the additions of Teach Me Something and #TakeoverTuesday invite BIPOC makers to tell their stories and use food to center "pleasure and joy as resistance" to systemic racism (brown 432). As members connect with other bakers, learn how to be more creative in the kitchen, and find joy through baking, they further Tosi's overall message that baking and baked goods are powerful community-building tools. But, from a feminist perspective, what do Bake Club's rhetorical strategies teach us about digital food communities more generally?

With the inclusion of multiple voices, Tosi is doing what Sara Ahmed refers to as diversity work, "the work we do when we are attempting to transform an institution" (91). For example, Teach Me Something and #TakeoverTuesday are Tosi's attempts to transform the professional culinary world through baking, demonstrating how digital food communities can use food to address racism in particular. What this case study shows us is that further research on digital and feminist food communities that began during the pandemic and the summer of 2020, in particular, is needed. Examining #BakeClub's rhetorical strategies is a starting point for inquiry into such communities and their evolution during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

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(W)reckoning Dual Pandemics Through Food and Hip-hop Topoi: An Analysis of *Ghetto Gastro*'s Afrocentric PCI Rhetoric

MITCH COMBS AND KRISTEN D. HERRING

> "We don't even want a piece of the pie – we just wanna make the pie bigger."
> –Jon Gray, *Ghetto Gastro* co-founder (Parham).

Contemporary chefs are pushing the boundaries of their work beyond the kitchen, taking on roles as Public Chef Intellectuals (PCIs). PCIs are public figures who rhetorically use their culinary knowledge, experience, and skills (Eckstein and Young). PCIs are distinct from "celebrity chefs" who profit from marketing their foodie persona like a product (Eckstein and Young, 205). In contrast, PCIs educate, build awareness, and create change in food cultures and systems, transferring culinary "knowledge from the technical sphere to the public sphere" (Eckstein and Young 207). Chefs Padma Lakshmi and Dave Chang are key examples of PCIs in popular food culture. Lakshmi's *Taste the Nation* and Chang's *Ugly Delicious* are food television shows educating mass audiences about underrepresented food cultures. PCI rhetoric is also expressed through a chef's interactions with food as "topoi," the symbols and materials of specific places acted upon to make rhetorical

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arguments (Dickinson 3). PCIs use food as topoi in physical and digital places to craft arguments about issues related to food and culture.

Currently, PCIs are responding to COVID-19's amplification of racism, xenophobia, and food insecurity in low-income urban communities. Popular media magnified these intersections during the pandemic. For example, the racist and unjust murder of George Floyd which took place outside of Cup Foods, led to news reports that highlighted the immigrant-owned convenience store in a low-income community experiencing food insecurity (Jackson; Sider). Stories of street food vendors – a labor force made up of many undocumented immigrants who feed low-income communities – described racist and xenophobic barriers in receiving federal aid and issues of over-policing (Abellard). Rates of food insecurity skyrocketed nationwide in low-income urban communities due to the pandemic. This garnered the attention of PCIs like Chef José Andrés, whose World Central Kitchen, which monitors food shortages globally and distributes meals via pop-up kitchens to low-income communities (Gregory) and Chef Marcus Samuelsson's restaurant "Red Rooster," which feeds vulnerable populations in low-income areas of Harlem (Samuelsson).

One significant group responding to these issues is the Bronx-based culinary collective, *Ghetto Gastro* (GG). Formed in 2012, GG is a group of professional chefs, entrepreneurs, fashion influencers, and artists breaking barriers in food culture (Parham). They have hosted dinners for Martha Stewart, appeared as guest stars on the *Rachael Ray Show*, and worked with Marvel to develop a "Taste of Wakanda" menu for the premier of *Black-Panther* (Parham). Co-created by Bronx locals Jon Gray, Lester Walker, Pierre Serrao, and Malcom Livingston II, GG is a self-determined "Black Power Kitchen " invested in racial equity and inclusion (Parham).

In this paper, we argue GG expresses an Afrocentric PCI rhetoric that uses food and hip-hop topoi to (w)reckon intersecting issues of racism, xenophobia, and food insecurity magnified by COVID-19. GG's Afrocentric PCI rhetoric combines elements of food and hip-hop rhetoric to critically flip the script on dominant, white Eurocentric representations and interests. In doing so, GG's Afrocentric PCI rhetoric decenters whiteness in popular food culture and attends to issues of food insecurity in low-income communities heightened by COVID-19. We analyze GG's activist responses during the pandemic including their pop-up events and marketing of limited-edition products. Previous scholarship contends PCIs use topoi to change public perceptions about food sustainability (Eckstein and Young

274) and disrupt "whitewashed appropriations of culinary traditions" (Young and Eckstein 56). Our study contributes to this scholarship revealing how GG disrupts whiteness in the culinary world using the (w)reckoning of Afrocentric PCI rhetoric to educate, represent, and create material change for Black and African identities in popular culture and in low-income communities. Before describing our theoretical framework, we contextualize issues of racism, xenophobia, and food insecurity within the Bronx that GG rhetoric addresses.

Contextualizing the Bronx: The Roots of *Ghetto Gastro's* Afrocentric PCI Rhetoric

GG's food and hip-hop rhetoric is grounded in the Bronx's historical issues of urban development, gentrification, racist housing policies, and policing that pushed people of color into low-income neighborhoods (Gonzalez). Redlining, systemic racist urban planning, and policing plunged the Bronx into an economic and cultural tailspin (Wallace). Construction projects like the Robert Moses Cross-Bronx Expressway cut across neighborhoods, destroying existing residential homes (Caro). In the 1960s and 70s, Bronx landlords set their buildings on fire to collect insurance money and evict residents of color (Wallace). Police used tactics like "stop-and-frisk mandates" and made racially motivated arrests that contributed to socio-economic hurdles faced by Bronx residents (Southall and Gold).

Dominant discourses fetishize the Bronx's history of violence, structural damage, and racism – stereotypically framing it as a dangerous place. During game two of the 1977 World Series, sportscaster Howard Cosell narrated the televised scene of fires coming from low-income apartment buildings outside Yankee Stadium stating, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning" (Lee). This phrase popularized the Bronx's reputation as a dangerous place in mainstream media. Reception of these discourses created a reductive image of the Bronx as a place riddled with violence, poverty, and economic catastrophes. These representations dismiss the context of racist and xenophobic systems that have contributed to the problem, and overshadow the creativity, innovation, and relationships formed among and between lower income communities in the Bronx.

GG draws from the Bronx cultural history of food and hip-hop to dismantle these stereotypes. The Bronx is a transcultural hub with rich intercultural influences of African, Caribbean, and Latinx foodways (R. Morgan). Bronx food practices such as family-owned restaurants, bodegas, and street food vending create various

interethnic enclaves that foster hospitable and affordable food for low-income communities (R. Morgan). Alongside these food-based interactions, hip-hop music and culture also started in the Bronx. In the 1970s and 80s b-boys, MCs, rappers, and artists occupied fast-food parking lots and heavily policed street corners, reclaiming their neighborhoods and appropriating the mechanisms of industry that disproportionately benefited white men (Knight; Naison). Hip-hop artists and fans occupied these spaces fusing Black American, African, and Latinx cultural traditions into public spaces. Without food and hip-hop, an Afrocentric history of the Bronx would have succumbed to cultural erasure brought on by discriminatory housing, zoning, and policing practices.

Today, the Bronx is "one of the most food insecure areas in the country," and food insecurity is expected to rise to 40% as a result of COVID-19 (Soni). SNAP recipients increased by 69,000 and "one in 10 Bronx residents" visited a food pantry or soup kitchen in 2020 (David). Grassroots movements by local food activists have emerged, such as Black Urban Growers, the Oaxacan restaurant La Morada, and GG. All are collectively demanding food justice in the Bronx and bringing attention to their local "food apartheid" (Lakhani; Torrens; R. Morgan). Optimistically, voices of food activism circulating in popular media are creating more awareness about food justice and racial equity in the Bronx. We suggest GG's Afrocentric PCI rhetoric attends to "food apartheid," calling out racism within food systems benefitting more affluent, culturally white neighborhoods. GG's rhetoric during COVID-19 provides an opportunity to understand how PCIs address intersecting issues of racism, xenophobia, and food insecurity. But how does GG's Afrocentric PCI rhetoric draw from food and hip-hop specifically as a mechanism of social change?

(W)reckoning Through Afrocentric Food and Hip-hop Topoi

Food's materiality in action influences people's attitudes and behaviors (Frye and Bruner). It takes material conditions and power seriously while recognizing the consumption, production, and distribution of food as rhetorical acts (Young, Eckstein, and Conley). Food rhetoric reifies power such as corporate messages of industrial agriculture that "mislead and obscure relationships between the production, marketing, selling, and consumption of food" for profit (Boerboom, viii). Yet, food is also a resistive rhetoric drawing from place to offer critical

stances, alternative meanings, representations, and ways of being (Frye and Bruner).

Food's relationship to place is key for understanding its rhetorical impact. This understanding includes cultural values communicated through specific arrangements and/or preparations of food material (Fox and Aldred), symbolic representations of food that elicit feelings of nostalgia for places like one's home country (Tran), and embodied interactions and ethics with food like local food consumption (Carolan). Eckstein and Young suggest that relationships between food, place, and people rhetorically influence perceptions, understandings, and engagements with food systems and culture. PCI's craft these "protopublic spaces" using food as rhetorical *topoi* (Eckstein and Young).

Topoi are collections of languages, symbols, materials, and other everyday practices that constantly modulate cultural meanings (Dickinson). For example, de Certeau explains that humans walk through a city in accordance with the rhetoric of city planning and follow the directions created by natural landscapes, bureaucrats, politicians, and engineers as they materialize in space. People resist the city cutting across empty lots, passing through back alleys, and creating alternative "paths" as rhetorical resources (de Certeau). Topoi are reflective of people's shared and located experiences with(in) place and can engage in critical and strategic communication (Dickinson).

PCIs engage food topoi to influence public perceptions about food and culture (Eckstein and Young). As a theoretical lens, topoi allow us to examine how GG's Afrocentric symbolic and material practices of food and place constitute alternative meanings and representations that challenge power. Chef Dan Barber's pop-up project "wastED," used food topoi to transform public perceptions about food waste and sustainability (Eckstein and Young). Chef Sean Brock's cookbook *Heritage* uses "terroir and topoi of the Lowcountry" in South Carolina to advocate for cultural and environmental sustainability and combat the erasure of Black American and West African foodways in Southern food culture (Young and Eckstein). Likewise, GG's rhetorical topoi draws from Afrocentrism to critique and deconstruct the dominance of whiteness and Eurocentrism embedded within social structures and systems of food (Asante).

Afrocentric rhetoric counters paternalistic victimization and tokenism with expressions of agency and self-determination, reflecting shared and individualized Black and African experiences as a form of empowerment (Asante; Strother-Jordan). GG's food rhetoric engages in a "reckoning" with dominance (Conley and

Eckstein 6) in similar ways that hip-hop operates as a form of "wreck" (Pough 17). Wreck disrupts the invisibility and stereotypes of Black people, using the "spectacle" of hip-hop in the public sphere to self-determine one's own representation (Pough). Hip-hop communicates one's authenticity of self and place through explicit lyrics, urban style, and Black vernacular defying conventions and dominance of whiteness in public spaces (Pough; M. Morgan; Brooks; Campbell). We refer to this rhetorical juxtaposition as a (*w*)*reckoning* – a food and hip-hop-based activism used to make do, appropriate, and reclaim rhetorical resources available to advocate for Black and African identities overlooked in local communities and in popular food culture.

Making Do, Appropriation, Reclamation

Food and hip-hop both enact rhetorical tactics of making do, appropriation, and reclamation. Making do manipulates symbolic and material resources to make the best of a disadvantageous situation (de Certeau). Making do is a common tactic for maintaining Black and African foodways disrupted by histories of colonialism, indentured servitude, slavery, and gentrification. For example, the cuisine of Black and African people such as chitlins, collard greens, and ham hocks emerged from needing to create something delicious, or "make do" with limited resources (Kelly). Making do is also reflected in hip-hop. Early hip hop artists performed in Burger King parking lots, and B Boy dancers regularly competed on street corners with freestyling MC's (Naison). Many credit DJ Kool Herc for "inventing" hip-hop in his Bronx apartment building by developing Jamaican style "sound systems" linking multiple turntables to a series of speakers and amplifiers (Knight). DJs, MCs, producers, and other hip-hop tastemakers accessed what was available to them locally to make music (Naison; Knight). Making do in both food and hip-hop represents how each discourse can be an Afrocentric source of rhetorical (w)reckoning.

Food and hip-hop also both utilize rhetorical appropriation and reclamation. Appropriation is when one culture or group adopts cultural elements of another group (Young and Brunk). Appropriation is problematic when dominant groups appropriate culture forcefully without consideration of marginalized groups; but it is resistive when underrepresented groups appropriate dominant culture to reclaim agency and representation (Ziff and Rao). Reclamation refers to the process of cultural groups taking back words, symbols, and representations used against them

in disparaging and oppressive ways. Reclamation is a collective effort that deconstructs and reinterprets problematic terms and places their meaning back into the control of marginalized groups (Brontsema).

Black and African food traditions have been culturally appropriated, silenced, and distorted by whiteness in food culture (Vats). Soul food, cuisines based in African and African American foodways in the Southern United States, are frequently stereotyped as cheap, greasy, heavy, unhealthy, and inferior to white, European palates (Vats). White people often appropriate Soul Food and other Afrocentric cuisines without recognizing their historical significance (Vats). In response to these issues, chefs have created critical food spaces to dismantle these stereotypes such as Eduardo Jordan's Seattle-based restaurant JuneBaby. Celebrating Black Southern cuisine in a fine-dining context, JuneBaby appropriates a Eurocentric dominated space and reclaims Soul Food as nutritious and worth paying for.

Hip-hop also engages in appropriation and reclamation. In the first half of the nineteenth century, several cultural groups of the Latinx diaspora and African Americans moved into the Bronx and brought their musical traditions along (Gonzalez). Clubs in the Bronx leaked the sounds of marimba, reggaetón, be-bop, jazz, and blues (Knight). After extreme reductions in public funding for musical education and performing, Bronx musicians reclaimed agency over their musical traditions by appropriating the improvisational tactics popular in many African and Black American performance traditions (Robinson). Hip-hop DJ's "freestyled" their sets, mixing records and rhythms that they pulled from massive vinyl collections (Knight; Naison). Rappers and MCs were known to freestyle battle one another, laying down impromptu rhymes and rhythms as onlookers judged their timing and flow (M. Morgan). Freestyling allowed hip-hop artists to develop a new Bronx-based musical genre. By appropriating the improvisational styles, hip-hop artists cemented the role of the Bronx in archiving Afrocentric performances in American culture. GG draws from Bronx food and hip-hop to craft their own artistic PCI expression, while giving their profits back to low-income communities in the Bronx afflicted by COVID-19.

Performative Pop-Up Events: (W)reckoning Space and Addressing Dual Pandemics

In May of 2020, BLM protestors took to the streets to protest George Floyd's murder. Protestors shirked stay at home orders still in place across the country to demand police reform but were met with aggressive crowd control measures like rubber bullets and pepper spray. City governments attempted to deter crowds with early curfews. GG seized on the moment to address the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism (Cooper). Collaborating with Rethink Food NYC, a nonprofit that recycles restaurant surpluses for food insecure populations, and the Bronx-based Oaxacan restaurant La Morada, GG served more than 20,000 meals to protestors (Taylor). The group effort started as a campaign to send meals "to seniors, people of color, low-income families, and formerly incarcerated individuals in the borough, which has more coronavirus cases than anywhere else in the city" (Taylor). But when racial injustice brought protestors into the streets of New York, the collective stood behind their commitment to address the racist politics of food. GG embraced the improvisational style embedded in hip-hop, moving their activism to locations outside their borough.

Recognizing the power of food in the fight for racial justice, GG reclaimed public spaces in Domino and Washington Square Parks (Taylor). They nourished the health of Black and Brown communities forwarding an Afrocentric ethos placing public health and racial equality on the same plane. This rhetorical leveling of the dual pandemics deconstructs Eurocentric understandings of public health that suppose pandemics are novel and the greatest public health threat to communities of color. GG asserted their self-determination in fighting pandemics on multiple fronts. Ignoring Eurocentric recommendations to stay inside, they "took it to the streets." Together with BLM protestors, GG used their talents and resources to represent their individual experiences with racism as evidence of the particular forms of oppression Black men experience in relationship with US American police. GG co-founder Jon Gray explains his relationship with the police:

> When I was going to Truman High School, I had to go through metal detectors. They had a precinct within the school. So, it was this constant state of surveillance and policing. And when I left school, I had to deal with stop and frisk. Before I turned 25, I was probably harassed and arrested by police more than 15 times. (quoted in Cooper).

Gray then connected his and his family's hardships with the violence experienced by communities of color. He exclaimed, "They see that even during a lockdown, they're [the police] still killing us" (quoted in Cooper).

GG reclaimed public space using a hip-hop style of improvisation during their pop-up for BLM. In 2020, GG reclaimed the streets of New York as a place to nourish public discourse about anti-Black racism and how it compounded in the pandemic. GG helped organize getting food trucks to a public demonstration where thousands of people willfully violated COVID-19 regulations, which banned citizens from using their streets for anything other than essential services. Public health professionals weighed the negative impacts of quarantine and isolation against the danger of spikes in COVID-19 transmission. Leaders around the world made the call to close streets and other public places of political discussion for the safety of communities. Prior to Floyd's death, media coverage of the pandemic focused on the need for social distancing over social progress, focusing on the hundreds of thousands of lives tragically lost to COVID-19 to the exclusion of discourse about the public health impacts of police violence in Black communities. As BLM protests ramped up, conservative pundits framed the demonstrations as hypocritical (Watson). Conservatives implied protestors were morally confused, supposing that a concern for public health measures was at odds with first amendment rights, including the freedom to assemble. Many seemed unaware of the hypocrisy written into their own jests. Nevertheless, media coverage paid little mind to the intersectional experience of being Black and staying at home during a global health crisis.

Ignoring shouts of hypocrisy, GG improvised. The PCIs choice to feed protestors demonstrates a fused food and hip-hop activism. GG improvised their response to BLM protests like a good DJ spins records. DJ's and PCIs alike access the rhetorical topoi in the Bronx and nearby historically impoverished neighborhoods, like Brooklyn and Greenwich Village, and embody the history of resistance that has kept Afrocentric cultures alive in the greater New York area. Hip-hop artists have used street corners, public parks, cultural technologies, and the history of African American and Latinx persons in New York as rhetorical resources for Afrocentric messages since the late 1970s (Knight; Naison). They used what they had available to them locally to develop a genre that has dominated popular music ever since, preventing the Bronx culture from being burned down and swept up for a check. From the ashes of disaster, hip-hop artists cemented Afrocentric sounds and performances at the center of popular culture.

Similarly, GG's flexibility allowed them to change their plan of action as the rhetorical exigence shifted. The collective responded to an audience hungry for overdue representation of the real public health inequalities that COVID-19 amplified for low-income communities. GG's hip-hop style and rhetorical improvisation further emphasized that issues of police violence and food injustice were each significant and urgent contributors to maintaining racism. GG shifted the resources and community partnerships they had already established to respond and "make do," with the call to protest yet another grievous assault on a Black man trying to survive in a community experiencing food apartheid and police violence. They did so fully masked and while meticulously following public health recommendations to the extent possible during a lawful assembly. GG's performative pop-up events activated an Afrocentric PCI rhetoric that w(reckoned) with dual pandemic discourses.

Food is a Weapon: (W)reckoning Popular Politics of Value

Beyond pop-up events, the strategic marketing of GG's limited-edition t-shirts functions as Afrocentric PCI rhetoric. Western society historically maintains social and political control over meanings that construct economic and cultural values around food products, methods, and materials (Appadurai). Consumer products play a role in perpetuating the dominance of social hierarchies around whiteness within food cultures and systems (Appadurai). Black and African representations, culinary knowledge, and foodways have largely been undervalued, ignored, and dismissed under the guise of popular white consumer culture of food (Vats). However, Appadurai reminds us, "Consumption is subject to social control and political redefinition" (5). GG shows how consumer culture can operate in resistance to such dominance. GG utilizes food and hip-hop topoi selling their limited-edition t-shirts for public consumption through strategies of making do and appropriation to reclaim Black and African representation in popular food culture and give back to low-income communities in the Bronx.

GG's marketing of limited-edition t-shirts appropriates norms of the streetwear industry. Streetwear is a popular genre of fashion within consumer culture. Companies like Supreme, Palace, and Adidas sell "limited edition" clothing at a high price and profit from the "authenticity" of urban street culture and style (Pham). Streetwear also has an intimate relationship with hip-hop culture. Yet, streetwear is often marketed as a "luxury product" in the fashion industry and

perpetuates racist and classist taste hierarchies wherein only elite groups of people can afford to purchase such products (Mull). Many streetwear companies also engage in the unconscious cultural appropriation of street culture. Hip-hop style for one, draws from expressions predominantly shaped by urban communities of color resisting standardized whiteness of conventional dress (Morgado; Mull).

GG (w)reckons and appropriates the generalized marketing strategies of streetwear companies through promotions of their limited edition "Food is a Weapon" t-shirt. At $77, GG's t-shirt expresses Afrocentrism and draws from food and hip-hop topoi to reclaim the representation and value of Black and African identities in popular food culture. Unlike most streetwear companies that absorb a majority of the profits from these sales, 100% of the revenue made from GG's products are distributed to local nonprofits working to aid communities in the Bronx experiencing food insecurity. Appropriating a white dominant capitalist system, GG's limited-edition t-shirts flip the script of companies extracting profit from histories of cultural exploitation among Black and African communities and culture. GG reclaims value to Black and African representations and people whitewashed in popular food culture through their marketing. GG's "Food is a Weapon" t-shirt functions as topoi because it operates as a symbolic and material resource that makes arguments about issues occurring in low-income urban areas amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

GG co-founder Jon Gray explains "Food is a Weapon" contains a double meaning – "just as food can be used as a mechanism of oppression, it also serves as a platform of empowerment" (Parham). Double meanings are a common feature of Afrocentric rhetoric, communicating resistance through "signifyin'." Signifyin' is a form of wordplay that communicates Black and African lived experiences and localized meanings to subvert dominant narratives of culture controlled by Whiteness (Gates; Brooks). Signifyin' manipulates "the gap" between denotative and connotative meanings of words, directing audiences to their connotative, context-bound meaning (Gates). Signifyin' reflects both tactics of appropriation and reclamation because it uses oppressors' syntax to disguise messages so they are only decodable by minority audiences in the know (Gates). GG's "Food is a Weapon" t-shirt employs signifyin' as wordplay drawing from symbolic Afrocentric food and hip-hop topoi through the materialism of a t-shirt as an activist message against racism, xenophobia, and food insecurity experienced in the Bronx.

The phrase "Food Is a Weapon" draws attention to the larger context of food insecurity among low-income communities of color as a signifyin' message. As

food and hip-hop topoi, the shirt articulates how food has been a 'weapon' of oppression among low-income urban communities like those in the Bronx. The Bronx is home to Hunts Point, the world's largest food distribution center profiting $2 billion annually (Tishgart, 2017). While supplying over 23,000 restaurateurs, residents still lack access to quality food indicating a lack of distribution and infrastructure for quality food in the Bronx (Tishgart, 2017). Even though these statistics are not communicated directly on the "Food is a Weapon" t-shirt, people who know or have witnessed and experienced food insecurity in the Bronx or in places like it, understand the meaning of "Food is a Weapon" as a call to action.

This message is further contextualized and reinforced on GG's online shop portal for the "Food is a Weapon" shirt. Co-founders Jon Gray and Pierre Serrao are depicted modeling the t-shirt with Gray holding up a fist symbolic of the Black Power Movement. These images are supplemented by the following caption:

> Access to food is and has been a race issue. Underserved areas historically exist as areas of food apartheid. We don't use the term food deserts because that implies a natural occurrence of some sort. This shit is anything but natural, but much like public lynching of Black people it is as American as apple pie. Food for thought. You do the dishes. (ghettogastro.com)

The marketing of GG's t-shirt uses food and hip-hop topoi to communicate and historicize how Black and African foodways have been appropriated and erased by white supremacy. While people might be attracted to the t-shirt's "limited edition" exclusiveness, they are confronted with a message of Afrocentric activism when they purchase the shirt online. This message suggests if you are a consumer and enjoy the fashion, style, and message of the "Food is a Weapon" t-shirt, you should also understand the context of Black, African, and Indigenous labor and exploitation embedded within larger food culture itself. GG's shirt makes the argument that purchasing this shirt is more than simply purchasing something fashionable; a purchase is an action supporting their anti-racist food-based activism. Furthermore, it educates consumers about the influence of Black and African foodways in American cuisine erased, uprooted, and silenced by histories of colonialism and Eurocentric privilege that still impact communities of color today. As a signifyin' double message, GG's "Food is a Weapon" t-shirt appropriates a marketing strategy used by streetwear companies to exploit consumer attitudes and habits of purchasing luxury items to reclaim Black and African representation in food culture.

The "Food is a Weapon" t-shirt simultaneously communicates that food is also a tool of empowerment. The materialism of the t-shirt is designed in a red, black, and green color pattern, representative of the colors of the Pan-African flag, a symbol of global Black Power Movements. The Pan-African colors and the "Food is a Weapon" message printed across the front of the shirt echoes back to Black Power Civil Rights era activism that fought against intersecting issues of food insecurity through a "making do" ethos. One of the most successful programs addressing food insecurity and injustice was the "Free Breakfast for Children Program" organized by Black Panther leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale (Milkman). Echoing these "making do" tactics of the Black Power Movement, GG uses the "Food is a Weapon" shirt as a form of empowerment beyond symbolic representations and into Afrocentric practice giving 100% of the profits to local nonprofits attending to intersecting issues of racism, xenophobia, and food insecurity in the Bronx. GG navigates racist and xenophobic food systems providing capital from "Food is a Weapon" profits to feed food-insecure communities in the Bronx. Rather than relying on white-dominated food systems and institutions that have historically failed to attend to these issues, GG makes do with this situation enacting Afrocentric (w)reckoning to create their own forms of change toward food insecurity in low-income communities of color. Using the signifyin' through the "Food is a Weapon" message to market their t-shirts, their marketing strategy embraces "Robinhood-like" tactics using affluence of people who purchase the shirt to give back to low-income communities experiencing food insecurity in the Bronx (Tishgart).

The "Food is a Weapon" t-shirt functions as Afrocentric PCI (w)reckoning through strategies of making do, appropriation, and reclamation. GG's marketing strategy sets a high price for Black-owned products reclaiming their value in popular food culture. The dominance of whiteness in food culture has created racial inequity. High-end restaurants and top-tier cooking products owned and operated by white people charge expensive prices because they are considered "professional" or "high quality." Meanwhile, food products and materials created by people of color are expected to be cheap and affordable when equal, if not more, intellectual effort was put into those products. When GG's streetwear is purchased and worn by consumers, it spreads arguments that food has been used as a "weapon" of oppression and empowerment among Black and African communities. Embedding Afrocentric PCI activist messages within the materialism of consumer culture, GG enacts (w)reckoning to reclaim Afrocentric representations in popular

culture, while giving back to low-income communities in need deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic rather than exploiting them for profit.

Conclusion

PCIs have always been civic-minded, prone to using their social prestige to spread critical messages about food justice. Amid multiple pandemics, GG shows that PCIs must remain flexible, ready to improvise or respond to communities' shifting needs. PCIs cannot afford to focus on single-issue politics. They reclaim public spaces to debate Afrocentric politics, improve foodways, reframe public health discourse, appropriate hip-hop marketing styles, reinvest their profits in the Bronx, and educate on Afrocentric causes like food justice and racial equality. PCIs can access the rhetorical topoi built by the communities they intend to uplift. Accessing local topoi to address issues of racism with Afrocentric rhetoric allows PCIs to craft messages specific to their audiences and "make do" with the rhetorical resources at hand.

Our study contributes to research on rhetorical topoi and the spatial characteristics of rhetorical persuasion. Space and place scholars acknowledge that arguments are specific to the places they originate (Dickinson). It follows that the Bronx must contend with intersectional, compounding oppressions of food inequities and racist violence. GG's Bronx-based Afrocentric PCI rhetoric is multifaceted, replete with examples of "making do," and expanded by hip-hop performance and marketing strategies. We suggest topoi that construct rhetorical arguments about food justice are equally as specific and located. Our analysis focuses on only one collective as a case study in PCI rhetoric, leaving need for many focused analyses of PCI rhetoric grounded in the emplaced politics of communities. Space and place scholars can develop understandings of the particularity of PCI discourse by asking a series of related questions. Because we are advocating communication analysis grounded in the politics of place, we believe that pop culture studies can flourish considering questions like what topoi are accessible to PCIs for making arguments for food justice in other major cities, in rural areas, globally, or in exclusively online spaces?

Our analysis also contributes to communication research interested in possibilities for disrupting white supremacy. We demonstrate how Afrocentric topoi flatten hierarchies between the dual pandemics of racism and COVID-19. We show how GG skillfully appropriates the capitalist mechanisms of marketing and

distributing hip-hop streetwear to reclaim the material resources. Our analysis suggests that accessing local topoi and incorporating the rhetorical styles of other types of public intellectuals like musicians and performance artists creates dynamic opportunities for PCIs and can (w)reckon hegemonic systems of Whiteness.

Finally, our analysis of GG's PCI rhetoric shows that food and hip-hop convey a critical edge in Afrocentric politics. Moreover, culinary discourse is enriched with other discourses related to arts and culture. We explore hip-hop as an example of an additional intellectual discourse that pairs well with Afrocentric food rhetoric. We acknowledge that other arts and cultural rhetorics might similarly expand the role of PCIs in popular culture. PCIs can team up with political leaders, community organizers, academics, visual artists, and other social influencers to expand their ability to create more equitable foodways.

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Appa, Everybody's Favorite [Korean] TV Dad?

MIDORI TAKAGI

In 2016, Canada's broadcasting service CBC premiered a new comedy series called *Kim's Convenience* inspired by the play of the same title written by Ins Choi. This sitcom, co-authored by Ins Choi and Kevin White, focuses on the experiences between Korean immigrant parents, their Canadian-born son and daughter, and the multicultural community they serve through their convenience store. The show, shown internationally through Netflix, prominently features Mr. Kim, or Appa, the seemingly conservative store owner who speaks his mind without a filter and often ends up in hot water. He antagonizes his family, friends, and customers while dispensing his brand of advice, and pronouncing his unique views and malapropisms. Though the program ended after its fifth season in 2021, the show continues to be lauded by critics, and in several reviews Appa has been proclaimed as Canada's "favorite dad" (Wong "Business" E1).

The emergence of *Kim's Convenience* is not without precedence. In 2015, United States network television launched two sitcom programs focusing on Asian North Americans: *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Dr. Ken*. The former is based on Eddie Huang's memoir and follows his childhood "as his [Taiwanese] family navigates the cultural challenges of settling into a city that is predominantly white" (Ngyuen 1). The latter focused on Ken Jeong and his experiences as an unorthodox medical doctor before he became a comedian. These two-family sitcoms focusing on Asian American families were the first to appear since Margaret Cho's *All-American Girl* in 1994, which was a milestone for featuring an almost all Asian cast on primetime television. Prior to Cho's work, the television landscape was filled with Asians as servants, nerds, sidekicks, threatening immigrants, geishas, and dragon ladies (Hamamoto; Tajima).

Given the general under-representation and misrepresentation of minorities on Canadian and North American television overall, the popularity of a show with Asian leads is noteworthy and deserves some attention. Furthermore, since mass

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media has a tremendous impact on public opinion, which in turn affects policy decisions, it is imperative to critically evaluate current depictions of minorities in all formats (Mastro and Kopacz 305). Quite bluntly, negative images of minorities teach viewers "they are threatening, deviant, and irrelevant to nation-building" (Mahtani 99). Positive images of minorities, on the other hand, would suggest they were good citizens, who are loyal to and productive for the country. The ascendancy of an Asian as the leading character provides an opportunity to explore how this program addresses stereotypes and, on a broader scale, shapes and reflects the racial discourse in popular culture.

Ins Choi

Choi's knowledge of Koreans in retail comes from his family's experience working in convenience stores. When the Choi family first arrived at Toronto, they worked in and lived above a convenience store owned by a relative. Many of Choi's childhood memories involved observing his father and uncle work in the store and helping when he could. His was not a unique experience; many of Choi's friends grew up working in convenience stores alongside their parents ("Who's Hot").

Choi wrote *Kim's Convenience*, the play and the television show, to honor the Korean immigrant experience, including the personal sacrifices and the hard work entailed in running a small store. The Kim family journey, as seen through the eyes of the first generation, is an ongoing process. They arrived with great hopes for their children's success but are burdened by the different cultural values and language of the host country. The heavy workload of owning a small business is exhausting and straining, and their traditional practices do not always fit their new circumstances. However, their story is not one of disjoint and loss, but of innovation. Each week, Appa and Umma (the mother) further develop a new cultural identity to meet work and family challenges. This evolving sense of self applies home and host cultures and sensibilities to fit the unfamiliar environment and its ordeals. This focus has allowed Choi to feature Asians prominently and to create characters that are "well-rounded" and "who have depth" ("Who's Hot"; Westernman).

In this way *Kim's Convenience* intentionally promotes cultural diversity without whitewashing the minority characters or relegating the immigrant experience to the periphery. In addition, the program features interactions between the Kims and their diverse customers thereby highlighting issues of race, gender,

and sexuality. It is understandable why CBC picked up this series to help reflect the country's "multicultural and multiracial nature" as mandated by the Government of Canada (CRTTC).

The enthusiastic response to *Kim's Convenience*, as noted in Facebook and Twitter feeds, and the fact it won multiple awards for outstanding performance, best direction, and best comedy series, suggests growth and change in the entertainment media ("Kim's Convenience 2016-2021 Awards"). This show demonstrates that both CBC and Canadian viewers (and beyond) can and do accept an Asian experience as the main focus of a series. Perhaps the greatest testimony of progress is how Appa's character, with his heavy accent and his strong Korean nationalist beliefs, resonates with non-Korean fans: "You were the Korean father I never knew I had/wanted…" writes one admirer (Tks); "You'll always be Appa to me," posts Luis Armando; and "You're really Canada's Dad now" gushes Suresh Singaratnam.

The few scholarly examinations of the series largely agree that *Kim's Convenience* constitutes a breakthrough in popular media. Nagy and Bánhegyi, for example, note how the program rejects a simplistic model of assimilation and suggest Appa and Umma show signs of a new transnational cultural outlook (54). Sherry Yu similarly argues that the show exemplifies an immigrant settlement experience that defies homogeneity. The Kims, states Yu, become Korean Canadians "in their own ways" that is dependent on "their own diasporic experience, life values, gender roles, language capacity, and views on sexuality" (14). Colleen Kim Daniher finds *Kim's Convenience* rich with opportunities to scrutinize topics such as the model minority myth and Black-Korean relations, which mainstream media generally avoids (21). Though no study suggests the television series is above criticism, they do agree the show is promising because of its discussions on immigration, identity, and interracial relations.

This work agrees that *Kim's Convenience* "carries symbolic and substantial significance" (Yu 14) but argues the show falls short of its great potential. Despite Choi, a Korean-Canadian, piloting the program and presenting Asian characters with more depth, the show fails to directly confront larger social problems that directly affect Asian North Americans. More specifically, the very way *Kim's Convenience* successfully connects mainstream audiences to Appa seems to undermine the series' ability to address, interrogate, and disavow racism and other inequalities. In other words, the more the show banks on "universal" accessibility, the less able it is to critique celebrations of racial difference and notions of inclusion

and belonging. This work offers a textual analysis of *Kim's Convenience* - specifically scenes from the first season - to demonstrate the possibilities and limitations of depicting Korean and Asian immigrant characters who are both unique and yet universally acceptable as ways to challenge mainstream media stereotypes.

This paper takes cues from Herman Gray's work, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, that highlights three discursive practices with which to analyze television representations of minorities. Though Gray focuses solely on the image of African Americans, his strategy is useful when considering how Asians have been portrayed in popular media beyond mere inclusion.

The three practices discussed in the work include (1) Assimilationist, (2) Pluralist, and (3) Multiculturalist. Briefly, programs that feature Black characters but make no mention of race fall into the assimilationist category. The focus of these productions is to integrate individual Black characters into the white world without any discussion of African American culture, traditions, or concerns. In the pluralist discourse Black characters are shown in a separate-but-equal world where they parallel the white society. Though there is some celebration of racial and cultural differences, overall, the characters "maintain a commitment to universal acceptance into the transparent 'normative' middle class" (Gray 87). Another characteristic of these first two categories is that the Black characters' values and beliefs are deemed "acceptable" and "normative" only when they comply to the white system of power. The multiculturalist discourse, the third practice, takes a much different approach by centering the African American culture in the show and allowing for a multiplicity of Black experiences to be depicted. The characters are not defined by the white gaze and break from stereotypes and tropes to demonstrate individual personal positions.

Applying Gray's work, I argue that *Kim's Convenience* and the character Appa have great potential to, and at moments, do reflect a multiculturalist outlook, but ultimately, they largely fit within the pluralist discourse. Though Mr. Kim's character is, at times, quirky while "dispensing folk wisdom in…broken English" (Ouzounian E9), his overall concerns and aspirations do not pose a threat to Canadian cultural unity and are in-line with most non-Korean Canadians. Appa is Canada's favorite dad (Wong, "Big Lessons" E1) precisely because he upholds values such as heterosexuality, individualism, and upward mobility. As a person of color, I would prefer the show demonstrate a multiculturalist sensibility as laid out by Gray but given the demands of popular culture and audience appeal, a pluralist

approach may be the best viewers can hope for. The sitcom can be commended for challenging certain stereotypes of Asians, but if one is looking for complexity in the Asian North American experience, this program does not - and perhaps cannot - present the range of diversity that exists within the community. Worst, the sitcom seems to reaffirm societal hegemonic values.

Kim's Convenience

The first season of *Kim's Convenience* is an appropriate starting point for an analysis because the premise and narrative structure of the show and the characters are revealed to the audience. This paper explores several episodes but pays special attention to the premiere ("Gay Discount") where the audience is introduced to Mr. Kim, the diversity of the customer-community, and the tensions that can arise with identity-conscious encounters.

In this episode, Appa is approached by two young men, Kevin (white) and Roger (Black), who ask if their poster which highlights their band performing during Pride week could be placed in the storefront window. Appa looks at the poster and immediately rejects it saying that it is a messy image. He then continues by saying he does not have a problem with "the gay," but is against the parade because of the traffic, garbage, and noise. He then asks the two men, "Why can't you be quiet, respectful gay, like Anderson Cooper, Neil Patrick Harris? They is all of the gay, but they don't yelling to me they is the gay" ("Gay Discount"). Appa ends his rant by acknowledging that some people do not like Koreans, but "We don't make big parade yelling at people: We Is Korean! We Is Korean!" ("Gay Discount").

Appa's refusal to accept the poster is immediately interpreted by Roger as a homophobic response and a hate crime; he proceeds to leave the store ostensibly to report Mr. Kim to the local authorities. Appa stops him with the explanation that he is not "homopebek [sic]" and if he were, why would he give a 15% store discount to gay people during the festival week? Once Kevin and Roger verify there is a "gay" discount, they seem mollified and the scene closes with Appa returning the poster to them with the admonishment, "You can do better" ("Gay Discount").

Co-writer Ins Choi admits that this was a "gutsy first scene" because it reveals the friction that can accompany merchant-customer relations when there are differences in identity (A. Lee). Most audiences, informed by the media, are prepared for contentious contact between merchants and customers, particularly if

they are Korean and Black respectively. Viewers may recall the New York City boycotts of Korean-owned grocery stores in 1990 by African Americans, and the burning of Korean stores during the Rodney King uprising in 1992. They may also remember the 1991 fatal shooting of 15-year-old African American girl, Latasha Harlins, by a Korean store owner for allegedly shoplifting. The news justifiably paid a lot of attention to this tragedy because of the senseless loss of life and the incredibly light sentence given to the shooter. However, according to research, the media tends to overemphasize negative encounters between the two groups (J. Lee 78), which in turn shapes the stereotype of a combative Asian shopkeeper.

The Korean store owner cliché presents the merchant as hard-working and family-oriented, but a recent immigrant who holds a strong affinity for their home country, is ignorant of cultural norms in the host country, speaks little to no English, does not smile (K. Park 492), and often miscommunicates with customers. According to Gottschlich, this stereotype is also accompanied by negative character traits such as being self-interested, deceitful, and untrustworthy (284). Furthermore, merchants' single-minded goal of profit purportedly makes them antagonistic or indifferent to shoppers' needs. This image of an Asian merchant verbally insulting and rudely confronting primarily Black customers has been popularly vilified in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989), Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993), the Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993) and on the *MadTV* comedy series which aired from 2008-2015 on Fox Broadcasting Company.

The television audience of *Kim's Convenience* is initially led to assume Appa is the stereotyped Korean merchant. Mr. Kim greets Kevin and Roger civilly, but without warmth. Furthermore, the binaries often assumed to separate merchant from customer are immediately presented: Korean/non-Korean, immigrant/native-born, and accented English/accent-neutral English. Viewers could anticipate conflict based on any or all these differences. But when Mr. Kim reads the poster aloud and asks incredulously, "You group is called…Gay Town Boys?" ("Gay Discount") his demeanor and tone of voice immediately suggests that the point of contention will be the differences in their sexuality: heterosexual/LGBTQ.

Though Appa denies being prejudiced against gay people, his words fall flat. His rejection of the poster and his criticism of the parade convince Roger, and probably the audience, that Mr. Kim is homophobic. It is at this point that writers Choi and White suddenly change the narrative and undermine the stereotype of a narrow-minded Korean merchant. By offering a 15% discount to gay people, Appa gives substance to his earlier denial of bigotry. Furthermore, Mr. Kim's actions

encourage Roger, and the audience, to interpret his rejection of the sign as simply a matter of personal taste, not anti-gay politics.

By ending the scene peacefully with a financial truce, Choi and White probably startled many viewers and helped counter the notion of an uncaring Korean store owner. However, this interaction surprisingly addresses other kinds of stereotypes. First, the scene moves away from the anticipated Black-Korean conflict. This is not to say that the broader conflict between these groups has been resolved; tensions between Black communities and Korean store owners in Canada and the United States have not subsided and true reconciliation has not yet been achieved. Yet continued focus on the negative interaction between them keeps alive the unproductive discourse of demonization and pathology, specifically the belief that Korean immigrants are racist and prone to use violence and Black shoppers are shoplifters and looters.

Second, the writers successfully expand the representation of cultural diversity beyond racial inclusion by introducing issues of sexuality. More specifically, Choi and White connect race/ethnicity with sexuality. Though Kevin and Roger do not mention race, their visual presence as white and Black gay men, belie the idea that individuals are either racialized or sexualized, but never both. This is also a particularly hopeful scene because Black gay men are, in comparison to their white counterparts, far less represented on television (GLAAD Media Institute 24). Roger's presence challenges the typical representation of gay men as being white and well-to-do (C. Han 52-3).

Third, during the disagreement Mr. Kim displays some flexibility and openness, not resistance or complete defensiveness. By rewriting the expected interracial conflict between merchant and customer, Choi and White flip the narrative and offer a more nuanced interpretation of a Korean Canadian immigrant and the complexity of negotiating cultural diversity while running a small business. Though he seems more concerned about his business than supporting the Queer customer-community, as Mr. Kim explains himself his motivations appear less anti-gay. In fact, when Appa professes to "have no problem with the gay" he is at odds with certain dominant practices and attitudes about gender and sexuality. By positively acknowledging the existence of LGBTQ individuals and their right to (quietly) protest, Appa resists society's expectations that everyone must function within the masculine and feminine binary. In addition, by giving the 15% discount, Appa even works against the "political persistence of homophobia" in Canada by

welcoming Queer patrons to his store and by encouraging potential customers to "out" themselves in the marketplace (Smith 66).

It is important to note that Appa's stance is also in opposition to certain Asian traditions. Though mainstream audiences would not be aware of this schism, Asian viewers would be. Appa's resistance to the gender binary significantly contrasts to traditional and contemporary South Korean notions of sex roles. The combination of conservative religious interests, homophobic political groups, and the legacy of Confucian values have created an environment in that country that pathologizes non-normative identities and criminalizes gay men in the military (J. Han 6). News and academic sources note the frequency with which mainstream South Korean politicians openly voice homophobic views and protestors physically attack Queer festivals ("Pride and Protest" 38). It also appears that many residents do not actively counter the anti-gay rhetoric and violence; recent polls show that most South Korean citizens oppose homosexuality and same-sex marriage (Rich 609).

Appa also appears genuinely curious, rather than indifferent, about his customers and starts asking questions. He asks his friend, Mr. Chin, about the differences between transgender and transsexual members though neither one of them have any answers. When he meets Therese, a drag queen, Appa hesitantly asks "You is what kind? Trans? Gender?" Though he is inquiring because he is unsure whether to give the 15% discount, he is trying to learn. This process of self-education even leads Mr. Kim to boast having a heightened sensitivity to the LGBTQ community. Appa announces that he can now visually identify who is gay. With this new "gaydar" Appa firmly defends the community and his store by ferreting out customers trying to "pass" as gay for the 15% discount ("Gay Discount").

Appa is also presented as flexible and responsive to customers and to the transforming culture, albeit with some confusion and grumbling. His encounter with Kevin and Roger appears to affect him; Appa becomes more aware of the changes in his customer base and in the neighborhood. For example, when conversing with fellow merchant Mr. Chin, Appa acknowledges a change in the local demographics: "Remember when we start? No gay in sight. Where they all come from? Immigration? Refugee?" ("Gay Discount"). Though he was resistant to the LGBTQ community's "noisy" celebration, Mr. Kim does concede that the parade and "they" (meaning gay people) are "good for business" because they generate more traffic to the store.

Immigrant Adaptation

Appa's openness to homosexuality signifies more than accommodating customers or being at odds with the dominant Canadian and South Korean cultures. This flexibility suggests he is occupying an unusual social position and developing an identity that is unique to the immigrant experience. Contrary to popular beliefs (or hopes), Appa is not assimilating in the traditional sense; he is not wholesale exchanging his Korean culture for the dominant culture. Mr. Kim is not clinging tightly to his heritage culture either. Rather, Choi and White present Appa as experiencing a more nuanced process of immigrant adaptation. In this way, the writers have created a more realistic portrayal of an Asian-North American immigrant.

In "real" life, Appa's identity could be described as one of hybridity as postulated by Gloria Anzaldua. Mr. Kim, by virtue of transplanting into Canada, is developing an identity where two or more cultures "edge each other" (Anzaldua "Preface"). For many immigrants, the result is not a comfortable combination of cultural traits and values, but a "clash." Counterintuitively, this collision does not paralyze individuals. Rather, it leaves them potentially more flexible in their responses because they are no longer able to "hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries" (Anzaldua 78-9). Appa gives us a glimpse into that evolving identity as he reassesses his values and goals with each new challenge.

This "clash" of values, or new-found flexibility, is demonstrated in one episode where Appa reassesses the Korean cultural tradition of "subeesu" (service), giving goods (in this case groceries) gratis to the new associate pastor Nina Gomez ("Service"). Though it is seen as an important part of supporting the religious ministry, as the monetary value of the gifts grows enormously larger, Appa becomes increasingly upset with the custom. Luckily, the pastor is also uncomfortable with the "subeesu" tradition. Appa is greatly relieved when both parties agree that paying for groceries is better.

This "clash" also occurs when Appa is encouraged to sign a petition to rebuild a nearby park playground. The white woman who is carrying the petition gives Mr. Kim a red pen to use ("Janet's New Job"). Appa nervously explains that in Korea you write down the names of dead people in red ink. The petition woman immediately expresses surprise at this remark and pronounces Koreans to be "superstitious." Appa scoffs at this observation, and Umma confusedly explains that they are Christian. His anxiety causes him to accidentally break the red pen.

After it is replaced with a blue pen, Appa happily signs the petition with no further incident.

In another episode, a cultural "clash" occurs when a customer continues to say ginseng instead of using the Korean word *insam*. Appa sharply corrects him and then references the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1910 to demonstrate how colonialism renamed *insam* ("Rude Kid"). In fact, Mr. Kim is quite consumed with Korean history and memory. It is based, however, on anti-Japanese, pro-Korean nationalism of the pre-World War II years. Because Japan colonized Korea, he cares little for Japanese products. When given the chance, Appa has Japanese-made cars, that are illegally parked in front of his store, towed away even though many non-Japanese people own those cars, as his daughter explains ("Ddong Chim").

This cultural "clash" continues to present itself throughout different episodes. Within this first season, Appa accepts that his daughter attends art school instead of a prestigious traditional university, she socializes primarily with non-Koreans, and she will choose her own romantic partners. In addition, Mr. Kim abstains from regularly attending the Korean Presbyterian church, to staff the store, and prefers to socialize with non-Korean merchants in the neighborhood. Through awkward and entertaining situations, Appa's seems to randomly apply Korean and non-Korean values that best fit his needs and the situation.

Perhaps this is in part why *Kim's Convenience* is so popular: Mr. Kim and his heritage culture are portrayed as being flexible and malleable enough to fit mainstream society. Mr. Kim does not support militant ethnic separation, nor does he embody a besieged immigrant who protests the majority. Appa is also not the overly successful "model minority" allegedly limiting everyone else's access to educational and economic opportunities (Maddux et al. 87). Though the Kims do live comfortably, the family is certainly not the idealized model minority type. The family has reached middle-class but will probably not go beyond their relatively modest lives. Their children have not gone to prestigious colleges, nor are they professionals in Fortune 500 companies. Instead, Jung, the eldest child, served time in juvenile detention and did not even complete high school. The younger child, Janet, is pursuing a career as a photographer.

The lack of a true model minority type helps situate the Kim family, and Appa specifically, well within the boundaries of Canadian citizenship. Mr. Kim is not an overachieving nerdy professional who excels in math and science, but a middle-aged, pudgy, convenience store owner. He sports tee shirts and casual clothing with reading glasses on a chain. He speaks with an accent but communicates in English

to everyone including his wife. Though not native-born, Appa seems like a regular Canadian. It is these qualities that prompt Twitter fans to gush about Mr. Kim as "really Canada's dad" (Singaratnam).

Though Appa does touch on sensitive topics, his twisted logic and blustery approach encourages audiences to feel sorry for him. For example, Appa's hatred of Japan, which is a real and serious issue that threatens international relations in East Asia, is portrayed as a quirk of Mr. Kim's that has little to do with current daily life of Koreans in Canada. As a result, mainstream viewers can laugh at references to this tragedy with no guilt precisely because it has nothing to do with them. Furthermore, talking about Japan avoids discussing the real elephant in the room: Canada's troubled racialized past based on indigenous colonization, discriminatory immigration policies, and police brutality (Anderson; Coulthard; Mullings et al.).

Through this risk-free view, Appa mimics an earlier flawed comic character: Archie Bunker. Bunker, from the sitcom *All in the Family*, was known for his conservative, super-patriotic views, and malapropisms. Rather than alienating audiences for using ethnic slurs, Bunker achieved the status of being a "loveable bigot," by articulating messages of confusion and misunderstanding about the then rapidly changing society of the 1970s (Vidmar and Rokeach 1974). Appa exhibits similar qualities of confusion in the millennia in terms of gay rights and what the younger generation wants. As a result, audiences are either laughing at him or with him.

In contrast to *All in the Family* which did confront issues of race and gender head-on, *Kim's Convenience,* generally avoids discussions of oppression in meaningful ways. Though many scenes suggest that the show is antiracist and anti-homophobic, overall, this sitcom is relatively silent about racism, social class, joblessness, homelessness, sexism, or the structural relevance of those factors. Instead, the show tends to valorize hard work, heterosexuality, patriarchy, the family unit, and individualism. As a result, the program does not show how "life is," but how viewers would like "life to be" (Walton-Roberts and Pratt 76).

It is within this context that the show ceases any progression towards a multiculturalist sensibility and lands squarely within the pluralist mode. While *Kim's Convenience* is a celebration of Korean immigrants and demonstrates racial and sexual diversity within the Ontario landscape, the sitcom does not force audience members to consider the politics of representing those identities and the social realities of minoritized groups. The multilayered forms of domination,

institutional methods of discrimination and violence, and a general discussion of power, belonging, and exclusion in Canada and North America are left untouched. Undoubtedly the direct focus on Asian characters does increase the representation of minority actors in mainstream programming, the societal stratification based on race, gender, sexuality, and class and how they structure peoples' lives (on and off camera) remains to be grappled with. This relative silence is particularly disconcerting because the program does encourage viewers to consider racial and sexual stereotypes and opens the door for more complex discussions.

Gay Discount

In the opening scene of season one, for instance, the conversation between Mr. Kim, Kevin and Roger holds great potential for a fertile discussion of homophobia and racism. When the two gay men first approach Mr. Kim, for example, we do not know whether Appa is straight or not. Most viewers have been primed to see Asian men as being passive, effeminate, and lacking sexual prowess through Western popular culture. Historically and traditionally Asian men have been portrayed as being lesser than white men. The racial emasculation of Asian/Asian American men is a result of the historic laws dictating citizenship, naturalization, immigration, anti-miscegenation, and labor practices which barred them from attaining the rights possessed by white men; rights including the ability to vote, purchase land, change jobs, travel abroad, and marry freely (Hamamoto; M. Park). As Park explains: "Asian American men are attributed with the inability to exude masculinity and are categorized as socially 'undesirable'..." (371). When positioned next to white hegemonic masculinity, Asian men are depicted as the "feminized other."

However, in this scene Mr. Kim is positioned next to Black and white gay males, so his sexuality and masculinity are assessed next to another out-group. This was a chance to discuss mainstream assumptions about sexual and gender identities and for the three of them to commiserate based on being "othered." Instead, Appa asks, in a scolding fashion, why they must publicly shout about being gay and parade loudly in the street. In fact, by criticizing and moralizing against their methods of protest and celebration, Mr. Kim assumes the mantel of heterosexuality. From the comfortable and privileged – though tenuous – position as a heterosexual, Appa remains silent about his sexuality and worse, implicitly defends it as an act of civility. By decrying the "noise" of the Pride parade, Appa helps maintain the dominant sexual hierarchy as the more discreet social norm.

Another lost opportunity is when Appa refers to Anderson Cooper and Patrick Neil Harris as "quiet respectful" gays. With this reference Mr. Kim shows a limited knowledge of and a preference for a gay struggle based on a middle-to-upper class existence, and the social status and legitimacy accorded to that group. Appa does not, for example, see racial or class differences in the struggle. Though Roger is Black, and ostensibly a working-class gay man, what and who he represents is lost in the discussion about "messy" posters and "noise." Roger's very presence challenges the popular belief that gay people are wealthy, well-educated, white, and male: the myth of gay affluence (Schwartz 10). Appa's reference to and preference for Cooper and Harris reinvigorates that myth. This is not to say that Cooper and Harris have not suffered from homophobia, but as wealthy people the risks of being identified as gay are far less politically, socially, and economically threatening for them than for working-class gay men. Mr. Kim does not recognize the racial and class differences between Cooper-Harris and Kevin-Roger; instead, he sees the former's relative "silence" as being the "proper" norm in comparison to the "rowdiness" of the working-to-middle-class parade, and as being worthy of admiration and respect.

Appa's allusion to Cooper and Harris as his reference point about "the gays" is also a moment where the fundamental diversity of the LGBTQ community could have been explored. Mr. Kim confusedly groups gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer under "the gay" title. He expresses this confusion to fellow immigrant, Mr. Chin, only to receive a response of equal bewilderment. Even when he meets Therese, a drag queen, and concludes they are eligible for the "gay discount," the writers miss an opportunity to discuss gender, sexuality, identity, and expression. Though many people assume drag queens are "gay men who perform in women's clothing," Greaf argues they lie on a much larger spectrum of sexual and gender identity. Some drag queens, for example, self-identify as transsexuals (Greaf 656). The dialogue between Mr. Kim and Therese quickly moves away from the question of "who" they are to discussing "why" they dress like a woman. In response to "Why you do like this?" Therese explains "It feels like me. Feels like home […]"; the conversation is touching and empathetic, but the moment of deeper discovery evaporates quickly ("Gay Discount").

Other opportunities for meaningful explorations seem to vanish, ironically, during the very conversations about racial and sexual identities. When Appa, Kevin, and Roger discuss issues of discrimination and stigma, the interaction works to define away racism and homophobia. Though Appa does allude to bigotry when

he states not everyone likes Korean people, his remarks underscore that only "some people" are against them ("Gay Discount"). By insinuating it is only a group of people who hold biased views, the nature and extent of prejudice in society is misunderstood. According to Appa racism is committed on an individual basis. Furthermore, the show implies that bigotry can be combatted through one-on-one contact, as evidenced by Mr. Kim's conversations with the Pride parade members and with Therese, the drag queen. By portraying prejudice within this framework, the larger institutional operations of racism are completely denied. The federal government's active disenfranchisement of indigenous people and its systemic efforts to bar Black Americans and Asian immigrants from entering the country, for example, are forgotten.

Institutionalized discrimination against LGBTQ communities is similarly dismissed in this opening encounter. According to Appa, such bigotry is not widespread, does not harm all, and does not affect everyone's financial success. To Appa, the ability of two gay celebrities to accumulate wealth and fame serves as proof that systemic homophobia does not exist; it is only a "small group of people" who stigmatize LGBTQ communities. As a result, the larger issues of civil rights, employment, housing and health discrimination are rendered invisible. Furthermore, within this vein, Appa is suggesting that members of the Pride parade should be using their time and energy in a more productive (economic) manner and not protesting or celebrating.

Last, but not least, Appa is making the argument that race and queer identities are simply a variety of social categories that a small group directs their intolerance towards thereby limiting the range – only a small group of people – and the impact: the violent history both of those groups have experienced. What is lost, for example, is how Asians overall were discriminated at the state level, and not just by individual employers, teachers, and landlords. On both sides of the 49th parallel, federal laws barred Chinese from entering the United States and Canada, summarily denied Asians from citizenship, voting, and owning land, and justified incarcerating people of Japanese descent in World War II camps. Because Koreans were either assumed to be Japanese, or were recognized as subjects of Japan, many anti-Japanese laws pertained to them as well. Early twentieth century immigration laws, for example, prevented Koreans from freely entering North America and it was not until 1962 when Canada (1965 for the United States) abolished national origins as the determining criteria for admission, were Koreans finally granted visas (Kim et al. 4-6).

Appa's denial of the historical and ongoing processes of discrimination unwittingly legitimizes inequalities by making some unexpected connections between race and sexuality. Though Mr. Kim acknowledges that he, Kevin, and Roger represent minority groups, Appa argues against parades and yelling to address social problems. Instead, he advocates "quiet, respectful" methods for change and points to Cooper, Harris, and non-protesting Koreans as proof of success. Through this equation, Appa implies several things: the "system" (as it is presently structured) works; using "quiet respectful" practices (i.e., using the "system") brings success while protesting does not; Cooper, Harris and Korean immigrants achieved their success by being quiet and respectful; and successful gay celebrities, such as Cooper and Harris, are like peaceful heterosexual Koreans who work well with the "system." Through this comparison, Appa unwittingly perpetuates whiteness, heterosexuality, and the myth of meritocracy as the norm. By upholding the "system," Mr. Kim blames the "victim" for their failure to achieve upward mobility, legitimizes inequality, and renders racial, sexual and class privilege invisible.

Mr. Kim further underscores these beliefs later in another rather "gutsy" scene where the issue of Blackness and commercial transactions in inner city stores is addressed. While minding the store, Appa teaches Janet how to spot shoplifters by playing a game called "Steal or No Steal" ("Hapkido"). At first this lesson seems to be based on racially profiling customers. When a Black customer walks into the store, Appa asks her whether he will steal.

Appa. What you think, steal or no steal?

Janet. You saw him take something?

Appa. No, because he is a no steal because he's a black guy brown shoes.

Janet. He's not going to steal because he's a black guy with brown shoes on.

Appa. Black guy brown shoes is a no steal – is a cancel out combo ("Hapkido" 0:08-1:01).

Appa continues explaining his system by pointing out that a white guy with white shoes will steal, but a "Brown" woman wearing a blue jacket would not. He then ends the lesson with the observation that should a lesbian person enter the store and they are whistling, they will steal.

It turns out that Appa's system is not based on profiling, but on a logic that appears serendipitous. This is significant because it immediately resists common generalizations about groups of people as wrongdoers. Instead, Appa haphazardly

identifies thieves based on apparel, shoe color or on the sounds they make in combination with their race, gender, and sexuality.

While Appa's reasoning is nonsensical, the scene does lead audiences to see a connection between individuals, personal expression, and breaking the law. The queer woman who chooses to whistle will steal. The Black man who chooses to wear brown shoes will not shoplift. The white man who dons white shoes is a thief. In each of these cases, the individual signals something about their propensity to steal (or not) through displays of personal taste, materialist values, and how they vocalize. By focusing on the individual, the audience is encouraged to pass moral judgement and blame a specific single person for wrongdoings.

There are benefits to this view. By keeping the focus on individuals, the show further diminishes societal criminal stereotypes that malign entire communities and subgroups. A pernicious stereotype, for example, indicts African Americans, and Black men in particular, as having a greater tendency to commit offenses, in spite of countering data (Alter et al. 1653). As years of research have demonstrated, this stereotype has been used to deny Black people access to basic needs, among other entitlements, and has resulted in unfair treatment in the legal system ("Report of The Sentencing Project").

By focusing on the individual, the show hides large-scale realities that purportedly have a strong impact on crime rates. Factors such as income inequality, employment and educational discrimination, and political disenfranchisement are often noted to have positive relationships to robbery rates, for example (Fajnzylber et al. 1347-9). Though the scholarly debate on this relationship is ongoing, there is persuasive evidence that these variables can create conditions that induce crime.

Appa's blindness to structural inequality underscores the factors that greatly constrain the program from portraying more realistic Asian characters within a multiculturalist framework. Yet, it may be what precisely makes Appa so popular with mainstream audiences worldwide. Appa's steadfast belief in the individual, in "bootstrapping" to success, and the supposedly fairness of the system, aligns with many mainstream core values. Arguably, Canadian audiences (and beyond) revere Appa not because of his foreignness which could be perceived as a threat, but how he fits with the dominant society. Appa is presented as the right type of immigrant who upholds the law, is not unassimilable but he has kept his right to his cultural and quirky authority. As peculiar as Appa's beliefs may seem to audiences, they do not fundamentally challenge Canadian hegemonic values. In fact, Appa is portrayed as the ideal immigrant citizen by embodying a non-threatening form of "cultural

pluralism," which the federal government considers to be the "very essence of Canadian identity" (Canada Parliament House of Commons 8580).

Conclusion

Kim's Convenience is noteworthy because it strives to reposition Asian North Americans and Korean Canadians specifically away from older racist constructions. This situation comedy rejects the notion of an Asian as a sidekick or as a minor character to whites, and lodges itself in the lives and experiences of Appa and the Kim family. Furthermore, understanding the show requires making sense of some of the Korean cultural sensibilities, which have been absent from network television.

Kim's Convenience is not the first program to offer such contradictory messages. *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, another Canadian television sitcom (2007-2012), represents an earlier CBC attempt to challenge Orientalist stereotypes and demonstrate Canadian multiculturalism in programming. This sitcom focused on a rural mosque in fictional Mercy, Saskatchewan, and the ways the worshippers negotiate living with the skeptical white residents. Scholars commend the show for countering certain racial tropes. Alia Dakroury, for example, finds that the sitcom "opened up a public space for Muslim Canadians to express their traditions, rituals, culture, and religion on primetime Canadian television" (Dakroury qtd in Kassam 607). Most Muslim viewers, however, would agree with Shelina Kassam's argument that the program falls short of presenting the "diverse realities of Muslims" (Dakroury qtd in Kassam 607).

Kim's Convenience suffers from the same drawbacks. Unfortunately, aside from the quirkiness of Appa, the sitcom mostly presents the Kim family as being similar to non-Korean Canadians. The world of Appa, though separate from the white world, parallels it through a simplified representation of Korean-Canadian perspectives and experiences. Though the program and its themes do interrupt the white middle-class gaze and focuses on cultural differences, overall, the program avoids dealing with the structural realities of racism, sexism, or classism. In fact, the program reiterates a notion of Canadian multiculturalism that supposedly demonstrates a level of racial enlightenment, but ultimately reaffirms whiteness and values such as heterosexuality, individualism, and middle-class affluence.

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The Rhetorical Interlude as Foreshadow and Strategy: *The 'Burbs* and Villains of the Cold War

BRENT YERGENSEN AND SCOTT HADEN CHURCH

On March 23, 1983, United States President Ronald Reagan spoke to the nation on the importance of being prepared for a potential war with Russia. This monumental speech, which represented an attempt to cool heated tensions during the Cold War between the US and the USSR (*e.g.*, Fischer; Kengor and Orlando; Mann; Matlock), included a plea for the audience to visualize lasting peace between the warring nations:

> What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant US retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies? ("National Security: President Reagan's Address," 00:01:23-00:01:45).

Known as the Strategic Defense Initiative speech, Reagan delivered his address to the nation on television from the Oval Office six years before the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent end of the United States' Cold War with Soviet Russia (Heller). In his address, Reagan emphasized the strength of Russia's missile arsenal, reflecting a national feeling of dread and uncertainty regarding whether Russia would attack the United States which was heightened initially two decades earlier with the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis (Munton and Welch). These ongoing fears, along with the United States' wars against the spread of other communist regimes in Korea and Vietnam, fostered within American culture a mindset of suspicion, a readiness to strike, and a continued proliferation of weapons (Newton-Matza; Hermann 2).

American movies being made during this time also reflected the general feeling of anxiety among the American public. Horror films of the era, for example,

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featured scenes where innocent victims were killed by elusive, masked villains with deadly weapons and a thirst for blood; the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th* film franchises are only a few notable examples. These films, in some ways, were cultural metaphors for fears of attacks from enemies from afar. However, other films of the era were incongruous with the fears and anxieties of the era fostered by slasher films. As the Cold War drew near to a close in the late 1980s, the horror-comedy film *The 'Burbs* mirrored the Reaganesque anxiety of the time (Heale), showcasing a suspicion from the American Midwestern protagonists toward the vaguely Eastern European characters who are presented as threatening villains. Given these historical resonances in the plot of this understudied film, this study examines how *The 'Burbs* frames these ostensibly villainous outsiders, as well as how it presents the American way of life.

This analysis is grounded in the rhetorical interlude (Yergensen), a theoretical orientation that examines the rhetorical speeches of characters in films. In particular, the rhetorical interlude focuses on the pivotal moment in a film when one of the characters delivers a didactic speech to another. Although the rhetorical interlude occurs as a diegetic moment wherein one character imparts wisdom and delivers important direction to another character to help them escape or overcome an on-screen quandary, these speeches frequently have an extradiegetic function as well; they can present a mouthpiece moment when a moral message between characters can also be a covert rhetorical device from the filmmakers to the audience. Given the function of the rhetorical interlude, to essentially present an overarching takeaway for the audience of the film, these cinematic moments should be explored by cultural critics as they reveal cultural attitudes through interjection and emphasis. Although *The 'Burbs* appears to be an irreverent satire of horror tropes, we argue that its pivotal speech near the conclusion of the film reveals a surreptitious commentary on the American culture of the 1980s. Months before the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, *The 'Burbs* interlude utilizes a rhetorical style reminiscent of Reagan's call to use pre-emptive aggression against the enemy and to be wary of people from USSR regions.

In this study, we argue that *The 'Burbs* is an allegory for the tensions felt by the American people during the Cold War. Using the interpretive tool of the rhetorical interlude, our analysis reveals that the film offers an allegory for these anxieties, through its use of foreshadowing and its articulation of strategies for the American protagonists to defeat the Eastern European villains as a fictional synecdoche for the USSR. This reading of the film presents a contribution to popular culture

scholarship because it illustrates how Cold War anxieties permeated American entertainment in the 1980s, transcending horror tropes and crossing over into unconventional genres like horror-comedies.

In *The 'Burbs*, the rhetorical interlude is delivered by the supporting character Art Weingartner, and as a result the protagonist, Ray Peterson, is persuaded about the importance of being aware of evil that can be lurking next door. Art's interjecting speech is a rare serious moment amidst the comedic narrative. However, the film is not easily characterized as merely a comedy or a horror because its sometimes silly moments are offset by themes of serial killers, mystery, a frightening ambiance in the soundtrack, and ominous cinematography that focuses on dark scenery and suggests frightening violence. The film, as a rhetorical force that coalesces in the moment of the interlude, manifests the intersections of Cold War fears and monster lore of "traditions and superstitions that once circulated in Romanian folklore" (Groza 1) in Eastern Europe, a region which has long been associated with European contentions surrounding the USSR (Hilhor and Scurtu), which is a Cold War mythology that is also described by Eric Kurlander in his work *Hitler's Monsters*. Further, twentieth-century Cold War fears of nuclear attacks were manifest in protagonists running from Cold War Eastern European spies (Braithwaite), a theme which permeated post-Cold War popular culture (Pavitt). Eventual victory over horror film killers and spies, who in their numerous stories had not been defeated by protagonists for decades, is finally manifest in *The 'Burbs*.

The Cold War, Elusive Enemies, and the Call to Strike

Reagan's address to the nation was preceded by decades of antagonism between the United States and the USSR that included military-strength chest pounding from both superpowers. The United States government distrusted the Soviet government, partly due to the USSR's post-war socialist policies that disparaged religion (Froese; Peris 1), along with Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech in 1984 ("Evil Empire") which bolstered the presence of religion as part of Cold War conflict (Chadwick). These Cold War tensions also stemmed from the fear that Soviet ideologies would infiltrate American culture, spawning the 1950s Red Scare when celebrities and others were questioned before Congress about their potential socialist affiliations as Soviet spies (Doherty; Storrs).

The tensions from this drawn-out war of words between both countries bled into symbolic depictions in American popular culture in the 1980s. For example,

the United States' dream of victory is manifest in a depiction of the boxing match in the film *Rocky IV*, as American fighter Rocky Balboa defeats Russian champion Ivan Drago in Moscow. Similarly, *Red Dawn* depicts United States citizens defeating Soviet intrusions on American soil. Further, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel 1956) and its remake (Kaufman 1978) are both Cold War-era representations of fighting enemies where the body is a cinematic site of conflict amidst the Cold War (Tisdall).These manifestations of Cold War discourse in popular culture and the accompanying strategic approaches of pre-eminent strike in the horror genre parallel the then-fear of socialist invasion, and the elusive monsters in horror films were signifiers of an overarching American anxiety about covert socialists within the United States. As such, both threats are addressed in cinematic discourses of establishing fear and the need to hunt and dispose of threats.

Killers in 1980s Horror Films

The 'Burbs was released at the latter end of the Cold War when it appeared that the Soviets were losing due to revolutions against USSR control (Hough). Similarly to how Russia had been perceived as a military powerhouse for years, in American horror films the villain was framed as virtually invincible. Like the United States' perspective on Russia in the Cold War, horror villains at the time were notorious for always eluding capture or justice (Call). Even if they failed to kill the protagonist in the climax of a given film, the killers nonetheless remained in the shadows, still hidden at the film's end. As Maria Beville explains, "horror works as[...]a cultural agenda which celebrates homage and repetition" (80). Were the villain to be captured or killed, the horror film would be resolved, and the series would end. The relentless repetition of escape in these films echoed an apparent cultural fear that international tensions would never cease.

Further, in the 1970s and 1980s, the horror genre would typically portray the villain as a central character throughout the film. Being more often a subject for audience fascination than expendable for the hero to defeat, the villain would return again and again in sequels and remakes (Hendershot). For example, in *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978), serial killer Michael Myers' eye-view of teenage girls is a central element of the plot as he stalks and then kills them. He escapes in the end of the first film, and thereby remains elusive through the franchise's numerous sequels and remakes (Rosenthal 1981; Zombie 2007). This tradition of killer as immune to death and capture coincides with the *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*

franchises. The portrayal of the fleeing and victorious villain is also vividly demonstrated by the villain Leatherface dancing with a chainsaw in the last scene in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, similar to Jack Torrence's appearance in the old party picture in the end of *The Shining* implying that he can forever accompany other ghosts in haunting hotel guests.

Cultural anxieties regarding serial killers, the possibility of nuclear war, and Eastern European monster mythology all converge to create the antagonists of *The 'Burbs*, the Klopeks. Their appearances are comedically outdated, they speak with thick accents, and both the interior and exterior of their dark home resembles a medieval, Dracula-like castle. Werner displays a charismatic, flowing accent and grace as a respected medical doctor, but is still reserved in a dark way like Dracula. His brother Reuben is more of a stiff and inscrutable manifestation of European monsters, like Frankenstein. Both European monster-like characters are manifest in this late Cold War-era film. Indeed, the United States' fixation on Eastern European monsters, the *Dracula* (Stoker) and *Frankenstein* (Shelley) stories, imply a distrust of the Klopeks. This distrust is captured in military veteran Rumsfield's aggressive interrogation of Reuben when he asks about their last name, "Is that Slavic?" (00:57:41). Offended at being identified with assumptions from the aggressive Rumsfield who always dresses in American military attire, Reuben aggressively exclaims in response, "No!" (00:57:43) seeking to hide his background and identity despite his Slavic name and apparent accent.

The Rhetorical Interlude

When pivotal speeches are included in films, it can be useful for the critic to read them as rhetorical texts. Notwithstanding their apparent role to move the plot forward, these speeches or rhetorical interludes (Yergensen), function as oratorical structure and delivery just as speeches did in ancient Greece (Aristotle; Kennedy). In short, these cinematic speeches can be considered persuasive discourses.

Rhetorical interludes are ubiquitous in popular culture. Due to their didactic objective, they are perhaps most easily observed in children's entertainment. In *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, for example, the theme of each episode included a speech from the hero to the young viewers of lessons learned in the given adventure. In the show's first episode, He-Man describes the importance of playing by rules and avoiding "the quick way to try to get ahead of everybody else [...] The people who succeed are the ones who work for what they want. So don't be fooled

by those who say they have a sure thing" (Clark). Similarly, NBC has for decades aired campaigns (*The More You Know*) where its actors provide public service announcements, such as *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*'s Karyn Parsons' appeal to girls to be aware of abuse ("1995 NBC *The More You Know*").

The foundation of this proposed concept for studying rhetoric in popular film lies in the potential to understand and explore the under studied rhetorical device of interjection in contemporary culture (Ameka; Wilkins). Interjection gives rhetors an audience's focus and heightens opportunity for impact, a topic that is "neglect[ed]" due to "the emotional aspects of language" (O'Connell et al. 418). These cinematic interjections summarize a narrative's prescription of behavior and problem solving, yet they also allow narratives to serve as illustration of an interjection's content. As interjections, these interludes can be understood as intentional in the film production process, allowing scholars to focus on both the production and narrative, and thereby observe films as cohesive rhetorical efforts. Grasping an interlude's prescription can only be fully understood in the narrative that is told as encircling the interjection, which is probably an entire film's story. This approach situates production decisions and narratives as central to the interlude's potential. By understanding the craft of film production as a strategically guided suasory process, scholars have additional critical tools for interpreting these texts.

The Rhetorical Interlude in *The 'Burbs*

Just before the interlude in *The 'Burbs* takes place, the film uses the technique of foreshadowing as three of the major characters, Ray, Art, and teenage tagalong Ricky Butler, congregate outside to socialize. Although the plot takes place during the summer, the three men wear jackets, their clothing suggesting a sense of foreboding, reflective of the "Anxiety in the Cold War Hollywood Epic" (Murphey) that will pervade the neighborhood over the next few days. The light, slapstick-style music that usually accompanies the scenes shifts to an almost chilling score. The use of this literary technique in Art's cautionary story invites viewers to connect with the film's protagonists at a more intimate level, and to preemptively justify their coming actions. In this way, foreshadowing builds expectations about the unknown future (Siulan, et al.; Bolt, et al.). Without foreshadowing, viewers may experience feelings of vulnerability where "the verbal message of the characters[...]encode additional implications" that are 'a sign which foreshadows

further events'" (Chruściak 17). Therefore, foreshadowing addresses the concept of cinematic time in a way that eases the burdens of protagonists and audience, lessening the uncertainty that invariably accompanies the unexpected possibilities of the future. In other words, without foreshadowing, the future is a dark abyss subject to the apprehension of uncertainty. Offering this cautionary tale, Art's telling the story awakens Ray's long-dormant memory of the murders, and instills into him the determination to act against evil. The speech also foreshadows for the audience the carnage that is yet to come.

At the beginning of the scene while observing the green sky, Ricky rhymes, "Green sky in morning, neighbor take warning," with Ray responding, "Green sky at night?" Ricky then quips with an unsure conclusion because he states his response in the form of a question, "Neighbor take flight?" (00:20:28-00:20:39). foretelling the coming peril that was thematic in late Cold War films (Smetak). As the tone of the film darkens in this scene with the introduction of ominous organ music, anticipation of "expectancy violations" is emerging "in the foreshadowing condition" (Boltz, et al. 593). Ricky turns and looks directly at Ray, also looking nearly directly at the audience. As Ricky tells the story of the movie *The Sentinel*, he also highlights the strange noises in the neighborhood that have emerged since the Klopeks moved, paralleling the plot of *The Sentinel*.

Beginning his speech, Art references how the circumstances he and his friends are in are similar to the events surrounding several murders long ago in the same town of Hinckley Hills, "You know, it was a night just like this that it happened[...]Hinckley Hills was a lot smaller. Safer too. Never had to lock your doors. Everybody knew everybody" (00:21:18-00:21:34). Relating this reference to the film's location, the film's opening shot is symbolic of the battle that will transpire within the story as a view of Earth that characterizes Universal Pictures' usual vanity logo continues into a long zoom until the camera arrives at a Midwestern location in the United States where the film's events happen; the location where American values are demonstrated in Midwestern settings of corn field farms and small, quiet communities, a region which Richard Nation describes as where people "resist the nationalizing and commercializing transformations[...]both economic and political" (1). Thus, the battle over the safety of the world is hypothetically displayed in the film as the opening shot starts with an aerial view of the earth that then spirals in to focus on a region of the United States that encapsulates America's "pride," the Midwest (Clayton, et al.). In this Midwestern location, the oratorical warning of a probable bleak outcome in the plot

is foreshadowed as Art tells the story of a man named Skip who murdered his family decades earlier in Hinckley Hills, a small community setting often represented in horror where places that seem the safest are the most rattled by killers (Holland-Toll).

As Art recounts Skip's unexpected killing of his family and leaving their bodies in the basement of their home to decompose, the Cold War's "dark obsessions of fathers [to] destroy both the lives of their offspring and the communities they live in" are exemplified (Covey 41). As Art continues the story, he walks closer toward the Klopeks' home, leading his audience as he explains how the people in the town did not know it was the smell of decomposing corpses that was pervading the community: "They start smelling this really vile stench over on Elm, and they figure it's coming from Skip's place." (00:22:10-00:22:16).

Art continues by citing the fault of the community of Hinckley Hills because of their trepidation against confronting evil, "And no one wants to say anything. I mean, what do you do, go knock on a guy's door, 'Hi, your house stinks!'[...]So people are trying to ignore it[...]trying to pretend it isn't happening." (00:22:17-00:22:21). As a result, people began to hang pine-scented deodorizers on their porches, a manifestation of a community attempting to address and even deny the reality of a "criminal father," which Susanne Luhmann observes in Cold War films about foreign soldiers. With this focus, Art's seriousness intensifies:

> Let me tell you what happened next. The state health inspector shows up. They go over. They talk to Skip. He says he has a sump pump problem [...] They leave [...] everything's okay, right? [...] Wrong! A couple hours later there's smoke pouring out of the windows of Skip's house [...] The fire department shows up [...] They find Skip's faily's bodies dead, murdered, by Skip weeks earlier by an icepick. (00:22:39-00:23:02)

Similar to Art's use of narrative to tell the details of Skip's escalation into madness, in President Reagan's 1983 call for greater United States missile defense, Reagan spelled out the escalation of the Russian missile development by showing maps of hidden placings of missiles throughout the world. For Reagan, the sharing of this information with his national audience comes while images are displayed on screen which show the ever-growing size, speed, and accuracy of the Russian missiles. In a similar fashion, Art also details the use of weapons, such as icepicks and fire, to demonstrate the gravity of enemies' threats. Fear of the weaponry of enemies was instilled for decades before Art's interlude, and magnified six years before *The 'Burbs* release in Reagan's address.

While speaking, Art walks to the front of the Klopeks' home, and the camera shot situates the dark house to serve as the backdrop to Art's conclusion, working as an "in-cinema object[...]creat[ing] semiotic and physical parallels between theatrical space and[...]haunted houses" (Castle 34). Art is raised higher than the camera and leans near to Ricky's face, opens his eyes wide for emphasis, and expresses, "Yeah! The guy killed his whole family with an icepick [...] You know what that is that all of those people were smelling over on Elm, Ricky? [...] Skip's family's bodies, decomposing in the summer heat" (00:23:05-00:23:35). Recalling the events, Ray has a stark recollection of the tragedy from when he was a child, and quickly declares his similar memory to Art's while adding to the story in a somber voice in his display of "the epiphany/redemption trope" (Haldey 136) that later allows him to solve the Klopek murders, "I remember that [...] I remember they took down the soda fountain that fall" (00:23:43-00:23:52). Then, throughout the rest of the film, Ray prepares his neighborhood to act against the evil lurking in the house next door. So, the interlude's foreshadowing has a paradoxical function: it simultaneously empowers and frightens. As Art's interlude functions as foreshadowing to the playout of Ray's pending confrontation with the Klopeks, the story of Skip foretells the probable events in relation to characters and their fate. Characters and audience both await the foreshadowed promises, hoping to be assured that success will come. The exigencies of characters are foreseen, and sometimes symbolically with the state of global affairs, such as presidential discourse about missile defense strategies. Foreshadowing tells the audience that the outcome is known by another character in the plot, one who can be trusted and whose orations are worth listening to and heeding.

In a similar narrative pattern used by Reagan, along with distrust of Eastern European countries in the 1980s, part of the significance of Art's use of foreshadowing is in the cinematography to align the audience with the characters for immediate reception of the speech. Emotional appeals and the use of fear can instill a need to act and to be pre-emptive in a time of worry about missile strikes, just as Reagan stressed the United States' needed to "prevent the greatest of tragedies [...] after years of neglect and mistakes," ("'Evil Empire' Speech by President Reagan") similar to the Hinckley Hills' community lack of ability to discern or intervene on Skip's murders.

As a rhetorical interlude is the pivotal moment for Ray becoming the protagonist who has the resolve and bravery to pursue and conquer in a fight with the film's antagonists, or "a turning point of behavior in the film" (Yergensen 23),

Ray's immediate transition to seriousness about a potential tragedy happening in their town emerges as his own memory of the Skip tragedy is awakened. Changing his behavior during the interlude, Ray ceases to have an annoyed look on his face. This transformation starts with the interlude when he confirms that Art's recollection of the murders decades earlier is accurate. The interlude piques Ray's interest, changes his perspective, and turns him into something new: a researcher for evidence and investigator of his neighborhood. Once a lazy cynic, Ray transforms into the neighborhood protector. Thus, the rhetorical interlude can be the turning point of protagonist character arc (Bell).

Ray as Action Hero

As Ray is awakened to the possibility of what sinister activities could be taking place in the house next door, he becomes determined to prove that the Klopeks are murderers because he "adopts the rhetorical interlude's principle" of action against evil (Yergensen 26). Just before the team's full investigation commences, Ray's determination to expose the Klopeks peaks when he speaks in a trance-like expression of focus, exhibiting the "States of trance" that offer "sensitivity to human experience" through character performance in film (Schauble 33). Moments following Art's interlude, Ray and Art spy on the Klopeks with the assistance of their military-trained and crafty neighbor Rumsfield. The battle with invaders on American soil is therefore escalating in this depiction of American interaction with USSR immigrants on American soil.

Upon initially meeting the Klopeks, Ray avoids eye-contact with them to attempt to investigate inside their home. His answers to their inquiries are brief. He is distant, filled with suspicion that he is in the presence of people like Skip from the soda fountain. These Eastern European men are manifestations of what Jeanne Tiehen describes as standard Frankenstein monster elements in horror film, "the mad scientist, the strange laboratory, the unstoppable Monster, and a path of destruction[...]Through these components, the story of Frankenstein reflects social anxieties" (66-67). Tihen's list of monster elements are displayed in the Klopeks' behavior as Werner Klopek works in the basement where strange noises emerge, and has a red substance that looks like blood on his hands when he is introduced in the film. Being aware that Ray feels awkward in their presence, Reuben Klopek stares intimidatingly at Ray and declares in an aggressive tone of frustration, "You are the one next door!" (00:54:23-00:54:26). Ray's subsequent investigations

demonstrate the strength of his commitment to proving that the Klopeks are serial killers.

After finding evidence in the Klopeks' home that could implicate them as the murderers of a missing elderly man who lives on the street, the investigator Ray calls a private meeting with Art and Rumsfield and declares, once again in a trance-like state, "I'm going over the fence and I'm not coming back until I find a dead body. Nobody knocks off an old man in my neighborhood and gets away with it" (01:08:11-01:08:24), or the "realist-observational narrative and the focus on individuals" in "trance films" (Schauble 33). They then go to work on their second investigation, cutting the power to the Klopeks' home, digging holes in the backyard looking for buried bodies, breaking into the home by shattering the glass window, and tearing up the bottom of the basement in search of evidence.

As the film moves toward its conclusion, Ray accidentally blows up the Klopeks' home in search for corpses when he unwittingly breaks their gas line. Feeling guilty and defeated because his search came up empty, he assumes he failed and that the Klopeks are innocent, reflective of the time's confusion during the Cold War, which Ronald Suny described as "Second-guessing Stalin" in Cold War confusion. Providing a twist in which the comedic nature of the film would provide the possibility for abandoning the noble fight on the part of the protagonists, the interlude's foreshadowing seems to have been, for a few moments, incorrect. Ray's temporary regret for his aggressive actions mirror the United States' ambivalence about enhancing its missile program in light of Reagan discovering a Russian missile arsenal (Mann).

The defeat of evil comes in the realization of the need to beat monsters at their own game and with their own weapons and strategies, and it is revealed that the Klopeks are indeed killers. In the interlude, Art speaks of murder with ice picks, deception, and the burning of evidence. Ray does some of these same things. He burns evidence, although accidentally as he blows up the Klopeks' house. He uses a pick to dig in the Klopeks' back yard as he searches for bodies, and, like Reuben's lie about the origins of their name and Werner's lie about the blood on his hand, Ray deceives his wife regarding his intentions to investigate. Ray uses the same strategies as Skip was described as using in the interlude, mirroring the United States new approach to strengthen its missile power after Reagan's 1983 call for greater missile defense (Munton). The Klopeks' murderous ways are exposed similarly to and coinciding with the fall of the USSR.

Conclusion

In being proactive against villains, evil's elusiveness ends as demonstrated in Art's final comments in the film as he is being interviewed by reporters after capturing the Klopeks, "I think the message to, uh, psychos, fanatics, murderers, nutcases all over the world is[...]do not mess with suburbanites[...]frankly, we're just not gonna take it anymore" (01:35:01-01:35:12). The villain is caught because of the assertive defensiveness of United States citizens. Similarly and also symbolic of the American's hero complex (Jewett and Lawrence), six years after his call for the United States to enhance its missile defense system and only months after the release of *The 'Burbs*, Ronald Reagan spoke in front of the Brandenburg Gate of the Berlin Wall and delivered his famous charge to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall!" ("Berlin Wall," (00:12:02-00:12:04). *The 'Burbs'* rhetorical interlude anticipates the defeat of Cold War-era forms of villains, ripe with assumptions that coincide with United States' common perspectives on Russia's USSR.

The pattern of villains eluding capture and justice is prescribed as ending with *The 'Burbs*. The Klopeks do not return again to kill in the way that Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, and Freddy Kruger did in sequels when the USSR was still flourishing. This is because "The late Cold War saw the advent of a new paradigm" where "humanity" was "saved through[...]actions" (Faithful 347), whereas before the 1980s when the Cold War was winding down and Russia was thriving, Cold War film was more nuanced, telling tales of espionage (Worland; Fedorov). But, *The 'Burbs* actions and their effects become more explicit in the context of the fall of the Berlin wall.

Like Soviet Russia aging and dwindling at the time of Reagan's call for the Berlin Wall to come down, the horror genre villain at the end of the Cold War era also ages past their potency. Whereas espionage was the format of intelligence in earlier Cold War film (Smith), a Midwestern neighborhood of slapstick-prone buffoons defeat European enemies. As the film concludes with the camera panning back out from Hinckley Hills and back out to outer space to once again give an aerial view of the entire Earth, the United States has defeated the then-described global threat that it had struggled against for decades. With symbolism ever-present in Cold War film (McNaughton), such as just before the Berlin Wall came down, horror villains in the United States, and from Eastern Europe, are shown to be aged

and comically weak in a physical altercation, so much so that an everyday citizen from the suburbs, such as Ray Peterson, can subdue them.

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Revaluating RPGs: A Response to Robert Sullivan's "Role-Playing Games as Art"

WALTON WOOD

Since modern roleplaying games (RPGs) appeared in the mid-1970s, gamers have tended to assume that RPGs are capable of attaining the status of art. Robert Sullivan's recent paper "Role-Playing Games as Art" makes an explicit case for this assumption. I argue otherwise – but not because RPGs are less sophisticated than other media. On the contrary, they are more sophisticated than the things we dub art, and considering them as art restricts critical inquiry into RPGs.

My argument proceeds counter-inductively. It draws ideas from anthropology, literary criticism, media studies, philosophy of science, and game studies to make a case for re-examining the dominant artistic assumption. Instead of elevating RPGs as a form of culture, that assumption may instead hinder deeper understanding of these games.

First, I describe the artistic assumption, its historical persistence, and its implications for gamers and critics. I then turn to Sullivan's argument that RPGs' artistic dimension arises from the games' printed materials. From there, I look to play's pre-cultural roots and argue that other media's artistic characteristics arise from play. Sullivan's criteria of art (derived from Camille Paglia) condenses into a set of play characteristics comparable to the defining features of festivity and revelry. These features align with RPGs while defying qualification as art.

Finally, I present the case that RPGs are more sophisticated than art in the latter's historically recognized forms. RPGs instead constitute a form of complex communication, the scope of which exceeds other media's relatively narrow boundaries. The challenge for RPG scholars and theorists is not justifying or interpreting RPGs as art, but instead developing more adequate critical frameworks for understanding RPGs themselves.

The Assumption of Art

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Sullivan's main concern is legitimizing RPGs within academic discourse by establishing them as "the new mode in the larger concept of art" (34). This goal makes inherent assumptions about culture, art, and roleplaying games. These assumptions are not original to Sullivan; they have been present since RPG players turned to interpreting and analyzing the games they play. In *The Elusive Shift*, Jon Peterson quotes many early players/designers/theorists – in context, they are simultaneously all three – who claim games are an artform. Among them are Ed Simbalist, who argues games are a narrative art akin to literature (Peterson 197); Dave Hargrave, who considers RPGs a performance art similar to improvisational theatre (207); Scott Bauer, who also likens roleplaying to film or theatre performance (239); and others are also discussed in passing.

Robin D. Laws' seminal essay on RPG criticism wears this notion on its sleeve and in its title: "The Hidden Art." In "I Have No Words, But I Must Design," Greg Costikyan characterizes games as their own distinct artform. John H. Kim, in "A Brief History of Fashion in RPG Design," explicitly examines the subject as an "artistic history" and periodizes its movements. Doctor Rotwang explicitly argues for games as art, albeit using a relatively lean definition of art as "a thing of beauty" that serves to "move" the audience. Other supporting instances abound in the history of RPG discourse, but I will not belabor the point here.

Even if all gamers do not subscribe to this viewpoint, there is a very visible and sizeable population who implicitly accepts and upholds the assumption that RPGs can achieve the status of art. This community's authority to establish and maintain that interpretation must be the first object of scrutiny.

The Influence of the Interpretive Community

The following summary is based on Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Sections I-V) and Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Introduction and Chapters 13-15). Kuhn and Fish devote their attention to scientific research and literary scholarship, respectively, but their observations and frameworks align closely, and they together present a model for examining any body of knowledge and its adherents.

Sullivan and all other RPG critics, scholars, and designers inevitably work within the framework and mindset of the academic and popular discourse surrounding RPGs. This interpretive framework implicitly informs (if not outright

dictates) the way the community perceives and understands RPGs. The major components are the paradigm, the interpretive community itself, and the objects they interpret.

Kuhn describes paradigms as bodies of knowledge and inherent assumptions. The paradigm informs the interpretive community, and it also defines the objects that the community scrutinizes and the characteristics those objects are perceived to possess. These perceived characteristics are the material of their attention and study, but as much as they inform interpretation, they simultaneously limit it as well; they can only be talked about because they have already been identified as something to talk about. Rather than constituting objective facts, the perceived characteristics implicitly define what that community can say about what it studies.

One of Fish's experiments (which he describes in Chapter 14) demonstrates how interpretive models call their objects into being rather than studying objective, stable phenomena that exist independently of their observers. At the end of a class session devoted to linguistics, Fish drew a box around a list of scholars' names, labeled it a poem, and instructed his next class to read it as such – and they did so very successfully. The words were not initially written with poetic intent, but because Fish presented the text as creative rather than informational, his students immediately began to interpret it within those boundaries. But if Fish hadn't presented it as something appropriate for interpretation, the students would never have perceived it as literature. This demonstrates how the interpretive paradigm defines and characterizes objects of interpretation rather than simply being applied to objective, raw materials.

Fish's example is a useful illustration, but it doesn't fully illuminate interpretive assumptions' epistemological consequences. To better understand their repercussions, we can turn to another instance in Kuhn's domain: light's wave-particle duality. While working on *Optics*, Newton failed to reconcile this paradoxical dual nature. He chose to suppress the wave characteristics and instead focus on light as corpuscles (particles). The success of Newton's theory effectively marginalized the competing interpretation, thereby foreclosing on inquiry that would resurface with the advent of quantum mechanics and new interpretations of the nature and behavior of particles and energy.

These examples illustrate how modes of inquiry and interpretation establish the characteristics studied, and how they also determine the ends of those inquiries. Interpreting RPGs as art inherently sets goals and therefore limits how gamers, scholars, critics, and theorists think about RPGs. RPGs are worthy of close, serious

attention. However, applying a different set of interpretive assumptions may yield more beneficial and productive (or, at the very least, alternative) results.

The Imposition of External Standards

Sullivan proceeds from general assumptions that material culture – paintings, texts, architecture, etc. – fall on a spectrum of value, at the high end of which sits art; and if a medium or form – in this case, RPGs – meets criteria for being called art, then its study acquires scholarly legitimacy. In Kuhn's terms, Sullivan's paper is a rallying cry for normal science: exploring gaps in the paradigm to improve its descriptive and predictive accuracy. In this case, the paradigm assumes all media tend toward art. As a result, the methods and assumptions that inform and guide art criticism and interpretation must be adequate for the scrutiny of RPGs.

In *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth argues vehemently against this supposition. For Aarseth, RPGs are "oral cybertext" (98) – an interactive medium that is ergodic, requiring "nontrivial effort" by the reader/player "to traverse the text" (1). This extra, ergodic effort differentiates cybertexts from traditional texts and other non-interactive media. In his first chapter, Aarseth recounts how literary critics initially tried to interpret cybertexts using theories and frameworks developed for the study of non-ergodic texts. He concludes:

> Even if important insights can be gained from the study of extraliterary phenomena with the instruments of literary theory (cautiously used), it does not follow that these phenomena are literature and should be judged with literary criteria or that the field of literature should be expanded to include them. In my view, there is nothing to be gained from this sort of theoretical imperialism. (15-6)

Aarseth is concerned primarily with digital cybertexts, but his warning also applies to the analog realm. Subjecting RPGs to external standards and values limits our capacity to investigate and understand the games themselves as games. By their very nature, RPGs overrun and exceed those theoretical, evaluative boundaries.

In "I Know What I Like!" (a direct response to Laws' "The Hidden Art"), Brian Duguid similarly warns against adopting a vocabulary external to RPGs. Taking a Marxist stance, he argues that RPG players are simultaneously both consumers and creators. RPGs embrace participants' play rather than mandating their passive consumption, and classifying RPGs as art alienates players from their own creative work.

Aarseth and Duguid both argue that we need a different interpretive approach to discuss and better understand RPGs themselves. Before broaching new interpretive models, we have to understand why those different approaches are called for.

The False Analogy of Comics and RPGs

To pave the way for discussing RPGs as an artform, Sullivan cites the emergence of comics scholarship and its reception in academia. Comics are, in the simplest terms, the unity of visual and verbal art, both of which – as visual arts and literature – were already recognized by universities, intellectuals, and the public at large. Despite this precedent, scholars faced significant professional and popular resistance when they began talking about comics in an academic setting.

My mentor, the late Donald Ault, contributed significantly to advancing comics scholarship while at Berkley in the 1970s and later at Vanderbilt and the University of Florida;[1] see his essay "In the Trenches, Taking the Heat: Confessions of a Comics Scholar" for a detailed account. Don did not found comics scholarship, but he fought to conduct undergraduate courses and graduate seminars about comics, thereby legitimizing comics studies within US academic institutions – the interpretive community that dictates art's legitimacy – by establishing comics' "'literary' aspects" (Ault).

However, RPG books' graphic and literary merits should not be the foundation for evaluating the sophistication and value of RPGs themselves. Sullivan's analogy with comics exemplifies a peculiar confusion in the RPG community: that "RPGs are understandable as a singular art, through a convergence of graphic design, visual art, and writing designed to encourage improvisational performance" (34). He goes on to emphasize how the "overlap between art and RPG exists in the form of these representations and writings" (38), thereby situating artistic merit in the material book. Later in his essay, Sullivan asserts that "the purpose of D&D is use: to be a played game" (44). But dice, books, and the other documents and materials used to play RPGs are not the game itself any more than a ball, lined turf, and jerseys constitute a game of football. They are the tools used to play the game.

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[1] Don's comics scholarship program at UF spawned the game studies group there, which he fostered and advocated for even though he didn't participate actively in the research and scholarship.

RPGs' material culture can, of course, be considered artistic. Documents can demonstrate sophisticated and creative use of design principles, and the writing can possess a literary quality in the sense of being emotionally and intellectually evocative. Even if we do not currently assign artistic merit to these images and texts, they may someday be granted the status of art even though they were originally intended for a purpose other than aesthetic appreciation and contemplation. As E.H. Gombrich reminds us, "most of the paintings and statues which are now lined up along the walls of our museums and galleries were not meant to be displayed as Art. They were made for a definite occasion and a definite purpose" (32).

Classical Greek amphora, for instance, sit under glass in museums where patrons can appreciate visual designs depicting daily activities and mythic stories. But thousands of years ago, these objects were valued for more than their aesthetic appeal; they were used as vessels for storage and transportation.

In the Western tradition, art has often been the province of the wealthy, and as such, it has served the practical purpose of communicating status and opulence. A painting did not necessarily have to directly represent this through its subject matter; it expressed wealth simply through the fact of being a painting, a rarified and costly decoration. During much of that tradition, religious institutions held great material wealth, and so they became the source of much art. Christian visual art in the Middle Ages provided aesthetic adornment within churches, but it also served the practical purpose of conveying religious tales and lessons to an illiterate population. Morality plays served the same function through performance and verbal narrative, but they have since passed into the jurisdiction of literature and theatre history classes. In these latter cases, art's aesthetic value was crucial for capturing and holding its audience's attention. But its purpose went beyond gaining a viewer's attention; once it had done so, the creative work could fulfill its true practical purpose (like instilling respect or prescribing morality).

Sullivan's argument for RPGs as art depends on the reification (and even fetishization) of the material objects at the expense of accounting for their intended purpose, which – as Sullivan points out – is to be used. There is a fundamental confusion about what exactly is being qualified as "art" in Sullivan's argument, and that confusion persists in the larger critical discourse. Are we talking about the materials? Or the *use* of those materials to play the game? Clearly, the physical objects can possess artistic merit, but as Gombrich suggests, considering them as

art restricts or removes their use value, and RPGs exist only in the use of those materials. RPGs are play.

Mörk Borg: An RPG Art/Rulebook

If *D&D* is art by Sullivan's standards, then *Mörk Borg* is a masterpiece.

The vast majority of RPG books, *D&D* included, are written and arranged as instruction manuals. The texts present the technical procedures for using the game systems' mechanics (typically rolling dice and interpreting the results), and they frequently also provide preliminary explanations of what RPGs are and how they are played, guidance on running games and playing characters, and other aspects of the hobby. The books' various apparatuses – tables of contents, numbered chapters, page headings, tables, indices, and appendices – are all designed to make the books easy for players to reference and use during play.

Mörk Borg dispenses with most of these textual features. It has no table of contents (though it does have excellent indices) or page headings to help navigate the book's various sections. It does not have an introduction. It does not explain what an RPG is. But despite these omissions, the book is infinitely more user friendly than the rulebooks for more elaborate games like D&D.

Writer and game designer Pelle Nilsson leads his reader into the game with evocative, visceral descriptions of its medieval-apocalyptic setting and lore. After that, he delves into the rules and mechanics, all of which are condensed into a single reference sheet at the back of the book (contra standard RPG practice of filling one or more volumes). Nilsson chooses not to hold the reader's hand and explain everything to them; he instead confronts them with the game's concept and atmosphere, motivating them to further explore the rules and begin playing.

Every step of the way, Nilsson's prose is accompanied by artwork and graphic design by Johan Nohr. Nohr previously served as graphic designer for other RPG rulebooks including *Symbaroum*, *Oktoberlandet*, and *Barkhäxan* (also with Nilsson), all of which more or less follow standard industry practices: a small number of unintrusive typefaces arranged in blocks of text that are juxtaposed with discrete illustrations.

In *Mörk Borg*, Nohr rebels against these standards. The artwork consists of some public domain images alongside Nohr's own original compositions in a variety of styles, and instead of segregating the images and text, the visuals underly and intermingle with the spreads' verbal components. Words sprawl across pages,

refusing to be constrained by uniform grids or even normalized typographic conventions. The book contains over 100 different typefaces, and their presentation uses novel tactics (like drastic shifts in family and size) that recall the typographic experiments of early modern poet-artists like Francisco Marinetti and Ilia Zdanevich.

Nohr's layouts and design choices do not neutrally convey the prose and juxtapose it with pictures. He brings the two into close connection through their shared visual expressiveness, which reinforces *Mörk Borg*'s tone and setting. The sheer visual diversity helps the reader navigate just as well as formal chapter breaks and headings could, but with far greater appeal and engagement. The physical book itself also features a host of novel design choices like black light reactive pigments, a printed marking ribbon, reflective foil, and debossed text on the spine that glows in the dark.

All of these verbal, visual, and material choices cleave to the aesthetics of punk and heavy metal music subcultures, reinforcing *Mörk Borg*'s overtly transgressive nature. It challenges preconceptions of what RPG rulebooks can be: functional technical documents, yes, but also richly creative art pieces. But none of this speaks to the actual experience of playing *Mörk Borg*. Nilsson and Nohr set the tone for play, shape the reader's perception of the anticipated experience, and inform their actions as players. From those actions, a narrative will emerge, but even the most literary plot and character arcs will result from player agency and creativity within the game's constraints. The game and the play experience are informed by the rule/artbook but are not identical to the book's art, graphic design, or prose.

The materials are not the game, and so this raises the question: is the act of playing RPGs an artistic form? Theatrical forms of play are already recognized as such, and Daniel Mackay's *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* places RPGs in this lineage of creative performance. However, Mackay's argument ultimately situates RPGs' aesthetic value in the inert, crystallized memory of the narrative that players retroactively construct. This, like Sullivan's argument, isolates artistic merit from play itself.

While similar forms like improvisational theatre certainly display the same sort of macro-level uncertainty that characterizes RPGs (at least from a player perspective), RPGs are an activity meant to entertain and gratify the players rather than an audience. They are not meant to be seen from the outside but experienced from within. And the experience of play does not consistently (or even necessarily) conform to the artistic standards of literature, film, or theatre; pacing and narrative

focus rarely, if ever, meet our expectations of well-wrought plots found in sophisticated examples of storytelling. But despite its non-conformity to those standards, play and art still share certain characteristics. This similarity prompts a re-evaluation of the fundamental question: is the act of play itself a form of art? Or does this concern divert us from another, more fundamental question: is art a form of play*?*

Play as the Foundation of Culture

Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* is an important inquiry into play that does not subordinate it to external values (for example, psychological interpretations of play and its utility for the organism). To examine play itself, Huizinga identifies its fundamental characteristics, and his definition continues to be a valuable and influential one. He writes:

> Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to […] stress their difference from the common world. (13)

Huizinga makes six key points worth emphasizing here: 1) Play is freely engaged; it can't be mandated or coerced. 2) Play is disconnected from ordinary life; mundane concerns do not apply within the field of play. 3) Play is intrinsically compelling and satisfying; it is not fundamentally connected to or motivated by any external goal or objective. 4) Play observes definite limits in space and time; it only happens in a certain place and duration. 5) Play operates according to special rules; these govern players' actions but do not apply to the external world, the rules of which likewise do not necessarily impose on play. 6) Play tends to establish a community that persists beyond the place, time, and activity of play; players develop cohesive bonds and a sense of being "apart together" (Huizinga 12).

These characteristics overlap those Sullivan derives from Paglia, which he uses to evaluate RPGs as art. To qualify as art, the object of interpretation must be "'spellbinding'" (Sullivan 41) (point 3 above); "'sacrificial'" (41) and having "'nothing to do with morality'" (42) (point 2 above); provide a "'transformative

place'" (43) (points 4 and 5 above); serve as "'a ritualistic reordering of reality'" (42) in order to "'tame aspects of reality, life, and nature'" (43) (point 5 above); and be "'aggressive and compulsive'" and "'scandalous'" (42) (points 2 and 3 again).[2]

Huizinga explains these similarities by arguing play is pre-cultural but does not end when culture begins; instead, it influences and shapes all manifestations of culture including artistic creation, to which Huizinga devotes two chapters. So rather than confirming games as art, we can instead qualify art as forms of play, and the artist's creative work manifests the play impulse in culture. The verbal and visual products – what we consider the art itself – are the static residue of that artist's play within their chosen medium.

We can evaluate the artistic and literary merits of RPG books' visual and verbal components, but this perspective forecloses on games' participatory nature. Games, like acts of artistic creation, are ergodic; they require effort and conscious decision-making, not a one-sided reception of words and images. We can consider the merits of an RPG book's graphic design and narrative structure (in the case of pre-written adventures or quests), but as Sullivan points out, the book is not meant to be read but to be used, and in the act of using the book (playing the game), the nature of the object fundamentally changes. When we talk about the quality of writing or images, we're evaluating static, non-interactive forms, and we necessarily ignore the crucial play dynamic that drives RPGs.

In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois takes Huizinga's project even further by describing how social interactions in play and games serve as templates for "serious" interactions outside the game's boundaries, further emphasizing how society and culture solidify from and preserve play impulses. In addition to establishing games' fundamental role in shaping culture and civilization, Caillois also contributes another important attribute that is especially relevant to consideration of RPGs: uncertainty. Games are experiences "the course of which

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[2] The mandate that art "'involves sexuality'" (Sullivan 43) is a necessary component of Paglia's critical project but need not be for others – particularly for those that seek to consider play without recourse to external concerns. Sullivan elides this criteria by citing *D&D*'s sexual naivety, which is superficially correct; however, the history and culture of the game are heavily biased toward heteronormative masculine ideals, although this isn't universal and is becoming increasingly balanced by greater representation in gaming communities.

cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative" (Caillois 9).[3]

In RPGs, this uncertainty frequently stems from the game's randomization mechanics (dice, cards, etc.) as well as group decision-making, which prevent play from becoming a string of arbitrary events. Uncertainty at the micro- and macro-levels introduce conflict and obstacles that players must overcome – unlike a novel's reader or a play or film's audience, who simply observe conflicts' inception, development, and resolution. Gamers must instead resolve these conflicts themselves. This constitutes RPGs' improvisational element that Sullivan describes, and this variability is a fundamental feature that sets RPGs apart from the non-ergodic arts.

Revelry as an Analogy of Play

Huizinga consistently draws attention to play's intimate relationship with festivity and revelry. This resemblance derives in no small part from festivity's own ties with religious ritual, itself a highly orderly form of representation (one of Huizinga's fundamental play categories, the other being competition). He and Caillois alike make much of play's direct relationship to religion and ritual, both of which order cultures and inform the art they produce.

To better understand this connection, we can turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, a study of carnival culture's influence on the works of François Rabelais, whom Huizinga dubs "the play-spirit incarnate" (181). In Bakhtin's introduction, he addresses the shape and scope of medieval carnival culture, which he describes as "a second world and a second life outside of officialdom" (11). This world embraces all people but rejects the rules of their normal world, opting instead for "laws of its own freedom" (7), temporarily liberating participants "from the prevailing truth and from the established order" by suspending "all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10).

Compare Huizinga's definition of play above to these points and to Bakhtin's summary description of the carnival-grotesque form's function in the literary tradition:

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[3] Costikyan, cited above, concisely and engagingly summarizes Huizinga's and Caillois's ideas in the context of tabletop gaming.

> to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. The carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (34)

Bakhtin associates festivity with a "strong element of play" (7), and with good reason: he and Huizinga are self-evidently addressing the same cultural impulse. So the question of qualifying games – as an active engagement, not a set of materials – as an artform can be clarified by asking if carnival culture is also an artform.

The material artifacts of festivals like Mardi Gras certainly possess artistic qualities and merits. Again, the materials are not the activity any more than a map is the territory it depicts, or a critical essay is the poem it interprets. Bakhtin himself denies carnival, with its "strong element of play," the status of art: "[carnival] does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life" (7). Bakhtin's answer sets a concrete precedent and analogy for rejecting play as an artform. Instead, it points us toward a different interpretation of RPGs: as an analogous form, similar but distinct, the study of which requires a different set of methods and values.

Play as Complex Communication

In *Gaming: The Future's Language*, Richard D. Duke characterizes games as a complex form of communication. Duke is primarily concerned with games that serve a practical educational purpose within an institution or organization. Simulations used in grade schools are one example. For instance, when learning about personal finance, a student is assigned a profession, salary, family, and expenses; within the simulation, they make a budget, purchase necessities, pay debts, and builds savings. Through the game, they gain personal, practical knowledge of money management and finance. Another example is Model United Nations programs, which focus on governance, international conflict, and other political concerns.

Activities like these allow players to explore and better comprehend the large-scale systems that constitute the world around us. Games present abstracted versions of those systems, enabling individuals to construct their own holistic

understanding of large-scale situations that may otherwise be incomprehensible. Duke argues that games therefore are a means of curing fundamental problems plaguing our society, all of which have arisen due to the inadequacy of sequential communication (images, writing, film, and hypermedia) for conveying actionable knowledge about complex problems.

Traditional media all deploy relatively simple modes of communication. The first is the monologue, a single person communicating to an audience of one or more. The next is dialogue, in which two individuals communicate with one another. The third is the sequential dialogue, wherein one speaker communicates with a number of isolated interlocutors who do not directly interact amongst themselves. All of these modes rely on linear sequence and relatively passive reception of a message.

Games, on the other hand, Duke calls "multilogue": a pattern of interaction that draws lines of simultaneous communication amongst multiple participants (rather than anchoring exchanges to a central speaker or source). This networked structure permits the free play of interaction, investigation, and the adoption of novel perspectives and approaches to problem solving. Games are therefore able to convey complex content and build holistic knowledge more intelligibly and effectively than linear modes of communication. Multilogues facilitate a heuristic understanding that is future oriented, flexible, and better able to comprehend and solve emerging problems. Traditional modes of communication, in contrast, emphasize memorization of information to be recalled and used regardless of how well suited it is to a particular conflict or situation.

RPGs are a means of mutual engagement, and players are able – through the game's vocabulary and mechanics – to discuss and resolve a problem in which they all have some interest. Players of Dungeons & Dragons may be interested in the problem of fighting orcs and taking their treasure – a competitive, mechanics-oriented problem. A game of Fiasco, on the other hand, orients around "powerful ambition and poor impulse control" (Morningstar) – a more psychological and social problem. But in all cases, a conflict that demands a satisfying resolution motivates communication amongst players, just as Duke describes.

In *The Elusive Shift*, Peterson describes how early RPGs explicitly situate themselves as existing and functioning in the act of communication. Of D&D, he writes: "At the most basic level, players participate in the game of *D&D* by talking to the referee. In lieu of any overview of its operation, *D&D* tries to teach by example, through a sample transcript of a dungeon adventure that records a spoken

exchange" (38). The book's second chapter, "How to Play," details how other early RPGs likewise emphasize play's foundation in verbal exchange. From RPGs' inception, the notion that these games exist in and as communication has been a fundamental (if not always explicitly recognized) assumption.

Duke organizes the broad categories of communication on a continuum of complexity. At one end sits primitive communication consisting of informal vocalizations and gestures as well as simple, formal communication like semaphore. Next is advanced communication, which includes spoken, written, technical, and artistic forms. Finally, integrated communication exists in multi-media forms and "future's language," of which gaming and simulation are primary manifestations.

In Duke's taxonomy, games are more sophisticated than art just as art is more sophisticated than hand signals.[4] As Huizinga explains, play itself – the defining activity of games as ergodic activities – precedes these cultural forms, and play crystallizes into artforms defined by certain limiting conditions. All of these – images, spoken language, writing, and other media – can be integrated into games, which maintain play's active and interactive nature. However, a given game's value or function isn't isolable in any one of the game's materials. The game itself is a complex system that exceeds the sum of its integrated parts and materials even as it permeates and imbues them with greater significance than they would possess apart from one another.

RPGs as Communication: D&D contra Fiasco

RPGs as a form of communication can be better illustrated by stripping away one of the games' common (but not universal) features: emphasis on dice and arithmetic. There is currently a strong trend in the small press and indie RPG space toward rules-light and minimalist systems. These games resist using rules and mathematics to meticulously simulate reality within the game; instead, they tend to rely more on character roleplaying and personal creativity to drive engagement and entertainment.

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[4] Duke consistently places "art" in quotations when referring to the craft and quality of games and simulation. In Chapter 5, "The Game Design Process," and in Appendix A, "Specifications for Game Design," Duke uses the term *art* in the sense of skilled craft – the "art" of creating an effective, efficient game in the same sense that a furniture maker has mastered the "art" of designing a comfortable, aesthetically pleasing chair.

This shift creates two significant effects. First, restrictions embodied in the games' rules are pared away, and so player agency increases. Second, this trend works against the assumption that random numbers and arithmetic are primary tools for resolving conflicts and challenges; in many cases, no straightforward formal solution applies. This places a greater emphasis on description and creative problem solving, both of which rely on critical thought and expressive language instead of comparing numbers.

The best examples are games that have minimal mechanics. They require few die rolls or calculations, and without the formal clutter, RPGs' character as a mode of communication comes into sharper focus. In many RPGs, one player runs the game; they're called the dungeon master (DM), game master (GM), or some variation thereof. This type of game is very centralized, hierarchical, and asymmetrical; it is usually organized and run by the GM, who arbitrates the rules, describes settings and situations, and portrays ancillary characters. The GM represents the world and its inhabitants for the other players, and the players describe their own characters' actions to the GM.

Games that forego GMs are more decentralized and tend to grant greater, more equitable agency to all players. One of the premier examples is Fiasco, which is designed to facilitate a conflict- and character-driven plot. It stands in sharp contrast to D&D and many other RPGs due to its extremely minimal mechanics and its distinctly different play experience.

GM-centric games like D&D hinge on a self-evidently lopsided balance of power, but objective numerical values and die rolls keep the game fair for all players. Consequently, characters are explicitly defined numerically: a fighter with 20 strength and 8 wisdom is incredibly strong but relatively dim, while a wizard with 18 intelligence and 4 charisma is very smart but not proficient in social situations.

Because it defines characters through numbers, D&D mechanically creates challenge and conflict by setting numerical difficulties for tasks. Players complete these tasks by rolling dice and calculating actions' outcomes based on their attributes, skills, and other quantitative values. The rulebooks provide specific procedures for attacking monsters, climbing walls, picking locks, swimming through turbulent waters, disarming traps, wrestling giants, and all of the other deeds that define fantasy heroes.

Climbing a tower to save a captive is an action-driven conflict, and in D&D, it would be established and resolved largely through the game's mathematical

mechanics. But swindling your stepbrother out of his inheritance by blackmailing his wife is a character-driven conflict, and in Fiasco, that conflict is established and resolved through conversation amongst players, not by rolling dice and comparing numbers. Characters in Fiasco are defined by desires and relationships. Gameplay consists of leveraging those relationships to achieve the character's goals while thwarting or subverting other characters. A set of elements designed to establish and escalate a conflict enables a plot to emerge through player choices and interactions.

In Fiasco, these interactions play out over a set number of scenes. Each scene is primarily devoted to interactions between two spotlighted characters. Players who aren't active participants in a particular scene can award a die to determine whether a character wins or loses that scene's conflict. The dice are only rolled three times during the game: to establish narrative elements, to create a major mid-game plot twist, and to determine characters' fates after the overarching conflict resolves. In the absence of die rolls and calculations, Fiasco players spend the vast supermajority of their time sitting and talking to one another, whether speaking in character, describing their actions, or contributing details to a scene. Even the act of distributing dice is a form of communication: it signals a decision about which character gains the upper hand in a particular interpersonal conflict.

As a result of being more verbally than mathematically based, Fiasco bears stronger, immediate resemblance to improvisational theatre, which is likewise driven by prompts and player creativity. In both cases, the experience is shaped entirely by players communicating verbally and physically with one another. Together, they explore a complex problem, develop a unique narrative, and – for better or worse – devise a solution through their mutual interactions.

RPGs as the Solution for the Problems of RPG Scholarship

In "The Hidden Art," Laws admits that RPG criticism faces a serious obstacle: "interactive gaming is in its very essence highly resistant to critical analysis" due to the fact that "all participants are creators" (95). Moreover, directly observing RPGs as complex communication inevitably alters the nature of that communication; "to watch a session […] will change its very nature," making inquiry into RPGs the "Schrödinger's cat of art criticism" (Laws 96). Likewise, Duke concludes his own discussion of observing gameplay on a similar note: "Observers in a game are invariably negative forces" (108).

In lieu of imposing external standards and practices, the most productive route to RPG criticism and theory is from the inside out. This is the approach taken by invested scholars publishing in journals like *Analog Game Studie*s and *The International Journal of Roleplaying* as well as those informally discussing RPGs at conferences, in zines, and on forums and social media.

Peterson, in *The Elusive Shift*, describes the early critical consideration and theorization of RPGs, which was integral to playing the games; *D&D* initially gave players some rules and a sample of play, and different fan bases (wargamers and collaborative storytellers) took gameplay in distinctly different directions: highly competitive and mechanics-oriented, and highly cooperative and narratively oriented, respectively. The early debates over the "correct" way to roleplay culminated in Glenn Blacow's typology of play styles, which set the tone for ensuing discussion.

In the 1990s, digital communities took up the same problem and began devising alternative solutions. Here, the conversation began first by describing player types before evolving into debates about in-game decision-making that produced the threefold model summarized by John Kim. That model in turn gave rise to other schemas concerned with how players pursue goals (Ron Edwards's GNS) and the desires that inform those goals (Scarlet Jester's GEN).

Although these models differ in their specifics, they (and others in the same genealogy) agree that different games accommodate different player preferences. According to these abstract frameworks, whether a game achieves a status analogous to art is a matter of preference. Those preferences themselves involve assumptions and interpretations no less covert or consequential than the notion that games can be art. And falling back on matters of taste doesn't bring anyone any closer to more adequate critical and theoretical understandings of RPGs.

Because games are complex, the problem of modeling them is likewise complex. But Duke presents games as ways of solving complex problems by modeling their dynamics. So perhaps critical discussions of RPGs can most effectively advance by modeling RPG theory itself in an RPG. This concept is implicitly prompted by Fish and Kuhn, who use games and play as analogies for discussing the dynamics of interpretive communities. In his discussion of Kuhn's notion of incommensurability, Paul Feyerabend (whose call for counter-inductive investigation motivates my own argument) does likewise. But given Feyerabend's anarchist epistemological project in *Against Method* and his personal history as a

performer (which informed his philosophical career), his gesture toward play is probably more intentional and serious than Kuhn's and Fish's.

James P. Carse, in *Finite and Infinite Games*, provides a useful roadmap for designers by sketching the ways a vast array of social and cultural activities can be understood as games. These games are played by people who have simply strayed too far into seriousness and forgotten that they're freely engaging in closed activities that they can opt out of. Scientific and literary theoretical concerns are already framed as games by Kuhn and Fish, and from Carse's point of view, RPG theory is also already a game – practitioners simply need to un-forget that this is the case.

In-Conclusion

RPG discourse currently labors under values not its own. It attempts to subordinate RPGs to a paradigm that fails to account for games' fundamental differences from other modes and forms of culture. In accepting this imposition, we apply external standards and attempt to legitimize RPGs within the current interpretive paradigm, and we do so at the cost of more adequately understanding RPGs themselves.

To ask if RPGs can be art is, from Huizinga's perspective, analogous to asking if a wolf pup will grow up to be a golden retriever. From Duke's perspective, the problem is analogous to evaluating art exclusively using frameworks and terms meant for describing non-linguistic vocalizations and physical gestures.

RPGs simultaneously preserve and emphasize pre-cultural (and pre-art) play impulses while also elevating play to a level of sophistication and complexity that exceeds art's boundaries. On both sides, RPGs fall outside the realm of art and the criticism thereof. The situation borders on paradox, and understanding it means grappling with its inherent complexity. To do so, we must meet that complexity head-on through investigation that appears possible only through the medium of games themselves. In sum, the interpretive community engaging RPG theory and criticism – perhaps even more so than any other – must, in it is own efforts, match the playful creativity that defines the games they scrutinize and discuss.

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Perceived Permeability of Group Boundaries as a Mediator Between Belonging to Multiple Fandoms and Loneliness

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The term "brony," a portmanteau of the words "bro" and "pony," refers to an adult (often male) fan of the television show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. The brony fandom is often characterized as unexpected, given its unusual demographic composition for a show that was initially targeted toward preteen girls, and arose through a fortuitous combination of internet culture, nostalgia, and the show's high production value (Edwards et al.). Despite these unforeseen origins (or perhaps because of them), bronies are especially passionate, loyal both to the show itself and to the fan community which rose up around it for the better part of a decade.

In 2019, the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* came to an end. In the same year, the largest annual fan convention for the show, BronyCon, announced that 2019 would be its final year. For many fans, the fandom was a social group they felt a greater sense of connection to than even their local neighborhood (Edwards et al.), 2019 was a time of uncertainty for fans, many of whom worried about the fate the brony fandom. Two of the authors, bronies themselves, can personally attest to the bittersweet atmosphere of BronyCon 2019: On the one hand, being at the single-largest gathering of bronies worldwide with an attendance of more than 10,000 while, on the other hand, knowing it would be the last of such gatherings. In many ways, it felt like losing thousands of friends whom one had grown close to over nearly a decade.

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In the present paper we review research relevant to the situation bronies currently face – an existential threat to their fandom – and how this might impact their social connections. We begin by briefly discussing the notion and operationalization of well-being. Following this we review research documenting how fans of other television series have reacted to the end of their favorite show or the loss of their favorite character. Next, we highlight the importance of fandom, and the social connections forged therein, including their relation to the experience of felt loneliness. We then describe a growing body of evidence outside fan research which suggests that belonging to multiple groups is associated with better well-being. From this, we suggest that bronies may be able to mitigate the experience of loneliness associated with the loss of the show and, by extension, the potential loss of the fandom. In particular, we test a model predicting an association between multiple fandom membership and loneliness, an association mediated by the perceived permeability of fandom boundaries. We discuss these findings and finish by presenting some caveats and limitations of our research.

Well-Being

There have been a variety of measures and constructs proposed to serve as indicators of individuals' well-being. For example, Linton, et al. reviewed 99 self-report measures of well-being to find 196 indicators of well-being, from happiness to depression. One of the dimensions they proposed when theoretically categorizing the various measures was social well-being which they defined as "how well an individual is connected to others in their local and wider social community" (Linton, et al.). In general, researchers tend to focus on two main clusters of well-being indicators representing subjective (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction) and psychological (e.g., purpose in life, personal growth) dimensions of well-being. As noted by Keyes et al., one of the main dimensions of psychological well-being is developing and maintaining positive and trusting relationships with others. In the present paper we use loneliness – the absence of positive relationships – as an indicator of well-being.

Breaking up with a Show/Character

The end of a show can create a void – both of emotion and of identity – for fans (Williams, "Post-Object Fandom"). Williams ("Starting at the End") notes that fans

tend to react in three ways when a show ends: (1) expressions of grief and sadness, (2) acknowledging the implications of losing the show for one's day-to-day life, and (3) expressing relief and distancing themselves from the show. Williams ("This Is the Night TV Died") calls the period after an object of fan interest has ceased to be updated (e.g., end of television show) post-object fandom. Williams analyzed message board posts just before, just after, and years after the television show *The West Wing* was cancelled. Additionally, she surveyed 23 fans of the show. Upon learning of the imminent cancellation, fans mentioned posting stories about how the show had impacted their lives. Some fans moved on to similar fandoms to presumably reduce the negative emotions felt from the loss of the fandom by replacing it. Despite this tendency for some fans to move on, Williams also notes that fans continued to use aspects of the show to inform current events in their lives and to keep the connection to the show alive.

Speaking to this idea, in her analysis of the *Twin Peaks* fandom, Williams ("Ontological Security") notes various strategies used by fans to keep their fandom alive. These include constructing an archive, discussion boards, posting about news of a possible revival, creating and sharing fanfiction, and first-time viewing events. Jenkins ("Star Trekrerun") notes that for shows, like *Star Trek*, a fandom can maintain itself, or even grow, well after a show has stopped airing. For example, Kazimirovicz finds that *Twilight* fans continue to generate fan-produced content after the series end through fanfiction, roleplaying, and creating fan art. *Star Trek* fans have likewise created well-produced episodes of their own, supported though crowdfunding (Dobson).

In the case of the television show *Hannibal*, Williams ("Fate has a Habit of Not Letting us Choose Our Own Endings") highlights the unusual position for fans, given that the show, while canceled, had the potential to be revived by a different network. She surveyed 10 fans who participated in an auction of show artifacts and analyzed Twitter feeds regarding the show. Williams suggests that purchase of artifacts from the show offered fans a way to hold onto the meaningfulness of the show. Indeed, after a show has ended, purchasing these artifacts may be especially meaningful, given the sudden scarcity or now-finite quantity of such artifacts. For other fans, purchasing the props from the show affords them the opportunity to be caretakers of the show. She further notes that fans posted unboxing images as a communal event, expressing how the artifacts were meaningful to them. When Bennett examined Facebook posts after the band R.E.M. disbanded, they found that fans mainly continued their love for the band in a manner similar to the fans

mentioned above: by purchasing merchandise (e.g., collector editions), sharing memories of the band, posting updates of what projects the band members were currently working on, and posting promotional photographs of the band as well as past news articles. In short, fans display a high level of nostalgia and connect the music to their life and identity.

In a related vein, Cohen ("Parasocial Breakups") developed a measure of parasocial breakups adapted from assessments of peoples' reactions to romantic breakups. Cohen used the measure in a survey of Israel adults and teens, asking them to imagine their favorite character was no longer on the air and measuring their feelings post-breakup (e.g., angry, lonely, sad, disappointed) as well as their expected behaviors (e.g., watch reruns, follow a different character). People who had formed stronger parasocial relationships showed stronger breakup reactions, with teens in particular experiencing more distress from the dissolution than adults. Far from being a "watered-down" version of real-world breakups, many participants reported being more afraid of a parasocial breakup than they were of a real breakup. In a follow-up study with Israeli adults, Cohen ("Attachment Styles and Relationship Intensity") found that viewers with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style experienced the most distress after an imagined breakup with a favorite character, relative to people with a more secure attachment style, again in-line with research on real breakups.

In another study, Eyal and Cohen sampled U.S. undergraduate students soon after the last episode of *Friends* aired. The researchers examined predictors of parasocial breakup distress. They found that participants' self-rated loneliness, commitment to the show, positive attitude regarding the show, the perceived popularity of their favorite character, and the extent of their parasocial relationship all significantly predicted the extent of the distress felt over the show's end. And when Lather and Moyer-Guse examined U.S. undergraduate students' reactions to a writers strike in 2007-2008, they found that affinity for television in general (e.g., "Watching television is one of the most important things I do each day") and, most presently relevant, the intensity of one's parasocial relationship with their favorite character, significantly predicted breakup distress. Rather tellingly, participants indicated that during the strike, rather than interacting more with friends and family, they instead watched reruns, and spent more time-consuming media. Put simply, people feel the loss of fictional media characters the same as losses of real people, and often turn to other forms of media to cope with the detrimental outcomes –

including loneliness – instead of replacing parasocial interactions with social interactions.

Fan Well-Being and Social Connections

The ending of a show can create feelings of loneliness for fans due to the experience of parasocial breakup. Beyond the loss of beloved characters, however, fans may also experience the very-real possibility of the fandom itself dwindling. The loss of a fan community could mean lower well-being for fans who lose their sense of connection to other fans and the social support contained therein. Indeed, a growing body of research shows that the social connections fans forge are among the best predictors of fans' well-being. Wann ("Team Identification-Social Psychological Health Model") notes, in research on sport fans, that fanship identification – feeling connected to one's fan interest – is related to a variety of indicators of well-being. Wann suggests that a likely mediator between fanship and well-being is the social connections one feels with other fans. And while Wann's subsequent research was unable to find evidence for this mediational model as initially described, Reysen et al. ("Anime Fans to the Rescue") did show that face-to-face friendships, but not online friendships, mediated the association between fanship and well-being in a sample of anime fans.

Reysen, et al. ("Transported to Another World") suggest that while the relation between fanship and well-being may be somewhat tentative, the relationship between fandom identification – felt connection to other fans in the fan community – is far more strongly associated. Supporting this position, Reysen, et al. ("Better Together") surveyed 336 fans of a variety of interests (e.g., music, sport, media) about their motivations for engaging with their respective fandoms (purpose in life, escape from stressors, and social connections), the extent of their fandom identification, and their well-being. The results showed that social connections specifically, and not the other motivations, uniquely mediated the relationship between fandom identification and well-being. This study is far from unique in showing the link between connection to one's fan community and well-being. Wann et al. ("Social Connections at Sporting Events"), for example, sampled sport fans at a game and asked them to complete a measure of loneliness. Three to six weeks later, the same fans were asked to complete the measure again while at home. The results showed that fans reported greater loneliness at home than at the game. Similarly, Ray, et al. surveyed anime fans online or at an anime convention with

respect to their frequency of face-to-face interactions with other fans, felt loneliness, and general well-being. The results showed that fans sampled online (vs. at a convention) reported less face-to-face interactions, greater loneliness, and lower well-being. A serial mediation model found that the difference in well-being between the convention (vs. online) sample was accounted for, at least in part, by the more frequent face-to-face interactions and reduced loneliness experienced by convention-going fans.

Taken together, these studies point to fandom identification in general, and being in the presence of other fans in a face-to-face context specifically, as factors that reduce fan loneliness and ultimately leads to better well-being. In effect, much of a fan's well-being stems from their connections to other fans, especially if those connections are face-to-face. As such, for bronies facing the possibility of losing the fandom that provides them with connections to like-minded others, they may be at risk for the loneliness and reduced well-being that accompany the loss of connection to other fans.

Multiple Group Membership

It is rare to find fans who have only one fan interest, or who belong solely to one fandom (Plante, et al. "FurScience"; Reysen, et al. "Transported to Another World"). Sociologists and psychologists alike have long recognized both that people belong to multiple groups and that there are benefits to doing so (e.g., James; Killian). Thoits, for instance, suggested that people who take on multiple social roles (e.g., friend, partner, employee) may experience better well-being as a result of having a greater number and more diverse set of social connections and access to the resources they provide. If a problem arises in one role or relationship, people with multiple social roles can simply fall back on the other roles and connections they have, providing them with a sense of resiliency. Of course, not everyone agrees with this position. An opposing belief suggests that a greater number of roles can lead to strain and conflict and reduced well-being as a product of the stress associated with these conflicts. There was, for example, a belief that U.S. women joining the workforce during and after WWII would lead to problems with marriage, abandoned children, and poor health (Barnett).

Rather than leading to role confusion, stress, and reduced well-being, however, research has generally found that having multiple roles was ultimately a net gain for women's well-being (Barnett; Crosby). Amatea and Fong, for example,

surveyed U.S. women working at a university (as faculty, researchers, administration) and found that the additional roles (e.g., family, work) predicted increased social support and reduced symptoms of stress. Ruderman, et al. likewise surveyed U.S. working women and similarly found that having more roles was positively associated with life satisfaction, self-acceptance, and interpersonal skills. And in a large longitudinal study of participants in Sweden, both men and women who had a greater number of social roles were more likely to experience reduced susceptibility to illness (Nordenmark). In effect, studies such as these illustrate that having a greater number of social roles in one's life is tied to better overall well-being (Ahrens and Ryff).

Other researchers have reached similar conclusions using other theoretical perspectives. For example, researchers utilizing a social identity approach (Tajfel and Turner; Turner et al.) have also found evidence for the relationship between multiple group membership and well-being, although they refer to identities instead of roles. Iyer, et al. for example, examined multiple group memberships and well-being in students before and after transitioning to college. Identifying with multiple groups before entering college predicted more positive affect after transitioning to college. In a later study, identifying with multiple groups pre-transition was again associated with post-transition life satisfaction, greater self-esteem, and reduced depression. The researchers observed that those individuals who belonged to multiple groups were more willing to take on the new university student identity, which ultimately led to their improved well-being. Other researchers have similarly found that individuals who belonged to multiple groups recovered faster after a physical challenge (Jones and Jetten), better well-being after suffering a stroke (Haslam, et al. "Maintaining Group Memberships"), and greater life satisfaction after living in a homeless shelter (Johnstone). Wann and Hamlet (1994) proposed a "joiners" scale which was suggested to tap the propensity of individuals to join and maintain membership in multiple groups. Higher scores on the measure were related to less negative emotions, depression, and loneliness. In short, identifying with multiple groups seems to be a recipe for resiliency and greater well-being.

One mechanism thought to drive this effect is the greater social support and, by extension, reduced loneliness that results from belonging to multiple groups. Illustrating this, Haslam, et al. ("GROUPS 4 HEALTH") conducted a randomized controlled trial in which people diagnosed with a mental illness or who were clinically depressed were either assigned to receive treatment as usual (control) or were encouraged to join and participate in multiple groups. The results showed that,

four months later, people in the group participation condition reported significantly less loneliness and less social anxiety than those in the control condition. Other researchers similarly suggest that when one's groups are in harmony with one another (i.e., identities are not conflicting), membership in multiple groups yields even greater social support (Brook, et al.; Chang, et al.; Sønderlund, et al.). Taken together, this research suggests that fans who are members of multiple fandoms should report less loneliness and be buffered against the loss of their valued fan identity.

Permeability of Group Boundaries

Presently, we propose a possible mechanism behind the association between multiple group membership and loneliness for bronies experiencing the possible end of their fandom: the perception of group boundary permeability. Tajfel and Turner suggested that some groups are more permeable than others. Permeability thus reflects how easy one believes it is to move between groups. For some groups, leaving the group would be physically difficult (e.g., it is difficult to change the color of one's skin), although the construct also refers to non-physical barriers (e.g., being labeled a traitor, loss of valued friendships). Furthermore, to the extent that the identity brings about material (e.g., resources) or psychological (e.g., self-esteem, social support) benefits, group members may find it especially difficult to leave the group.

There is little research examining the association between permeability of group boundaries and well-being. Plante, et al. ("Interaction of Socio-Structural Characteristics") assessed furries' perceived permeability of group boundaries along with variables such as concealing one's fan identity, self-esteem, and demographics. Permeability was positively correlated with concealing one's fan identity and level of education, but it was not significantly associated with self-esteem. Terry, et al. surveyed Asian international students attending university in Australia regarding permeability (i.e., perceived ease to join in groups with Australian students) near to arrival and psychological (i.e., depressive symptoms), sociocultural (i.e., practical and cognitive), and academic (e.g., confidence in completing stay) adjustment eight weeks into the semester. Greater perceived permeability was positively correlated with sociocultural and academic adjustment, and in a positive, but nonsignificant, direction for psychological adjustment. Thus, the results are mixed with respect to permeability and well-being.

Testing a Model

The purpose of the present study is to test whether permeability of group boundaries mediates the relationship between belonging to multiple fandoms and loneliness in a sample of bronies facing an existential threat to the brony fandom. In 2019, we asked bronies to complete measures about multiple group membership, perceived permeability of group boundaries, and loneliness in the same year that both the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and BronyCon were ending. As noted by Eyal and Cohen, loneliness is associated with a show ending (i.e., parasocial breakup), and a wealth of research has shown that belonging to multiple groups is associated with better well-being, including reduced loneliness (e.g., Haslam, et al. "GROUPS 4 HEALTH"). To this end, we predicted that (1) belonging to multiple fandoms would be related to less loneliness, (2) multiple fandom membership would predict permeability, and (3) permeability would mediate the association between multiple fandom membership and loneliness.

Participants and Design

Participants were bronies ($N = 690$, 77.9% male; $M_{age} = 27.17$, $SD_{age} = 8.02$) recruited from a fan-related website (n = 436, equestriadaily.com) and at BronyCon 2019 ($n = 254$, Baltimore, MD). As part of a larger study regarding the brony fandom, participants completed measures about fandom membership, permeability of the brony fandom, and loneliness. All measures used a 7-point Likert-type scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree (see Table 1 for means, standard deviation, and reliability alphas).

Multiple fandom membership was assessed with two items ("I am a member of many different fandoms," "I am active in lots of different fandoms") adapted from prior research (Haslam, et al. "Maintaining Group Memberships"; Wagoner, et al.). Permeability of group boundaries was assessed with two items ("If I wanted to, it would be easy to change from brony to a non-brony," "If I wanted to, it would not be a problem to move from the brony fan group to a non-brony group") adapted from prior research (Mummendey, et al.; Plante, et al. "Interaction of Socio-Structural Characteristics"). Lastly, six items (e.g., "I feel isolated from others") were adapted from prior research (Russell, et al.) to assess felt loneliness.

Results

We first examined correlations between the assessed variables. As shown in Table 1, multiple fandom membership was positively related to permeability and negatively related to loneliness, and loneliness was negatively related to permeability. Or, to put it another way, those who belonged to more fan groups were more likely to see the boundary between different fandoms as more permeable and were also less likely to report feeling. Moreover, those who saw the boundary between different fandoms as being more permeable were also less likely to feel lonely.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviation, Reliability, and Correlations between Assessed Variables

Variable	Multi-Fandom	Permeable	Loneliness
Multi-Fandom	--	--	--
Permeable	.18**	--	--
Loneliness	-.09*	-.16**	--
Mean	3.99	3.71	3.46
SD	1.86	1.67	1.50
Alpha	.88	.77	.85

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

In light of these findings, we next examined the hypothesized mediation model wherein the link between belonging to more fan groups and feeling lonely was driven, at least in part, by their shared association with greater inter-fandom permeability. We entered multiple fandom membership as the predictor variable, permeability of group boundaries as the mediator, and loneliness as the outcome variable (see Figure 1). The model was tested using the Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS, which used a bias-corrected bootstrapping technique to generate 20,000 sample datasets using the mean and variability data of our own data. From this sample of datasets, we were able to estimate the magnitude of each of the associations in our model by calculating a set of confidence intervals within which the magnitudes of 95% of our samples fell. Put simply, if the 95% confidence

interval for an association did not include the value of 0, the association was deemed to be significantly different enough from 0 (a lack of association) to be considered an actual association.

Table 2
Mediation Analyses

Path	Effect (*SE*)	*t*	*p*	CI$_L$	CI$_U$	*Z*
Fandoms ➔ Perm	.16 (.03)	4.81	< .001	.096	.228	
Perm ➔ Lonely	-.13 (.03)	-3.85	< .001	-.200	-.065	
Total Effect	-.07 (.03)	-2.31	.021	-.131	-.011	
Direct Effect	-.05 (.03)	-1.60	.110	-.110	.011	
Indirect Effect	-.02 (.01)	--	.003	-.039	-.009	-2.97

Using this procedure, belonging to multiple fandoms was associated with less loneliness and greater perceived permeability of group boundaries. Furthermore, permeability of group boundaries predicts less loneliness. When permeability was included in the model and statistically controlled for, the direct relationship between multiple fandom memberships and loneliness was reduced, suggesting that perceived permeability may play a role in the association. Speaking to this possibility, the indirect association wherein permeability mediates the association between multiple fandom membership and loneliness was statistically significantly different from zero (see Table 2 for all relevant statistics).

Discussion of Results

The purpose of the present study was to test a model of perceived permeability of group boundaries as a mediator of multiple fandom membership and loneliness at a unique time for the brony fandom. We predicted, and found, that permeability mediated the association between belonging to multiple fandoms and loneliness. The results highlight buffers to potential emotional distress and reduced well-being in a fandom that is potentially about to end.
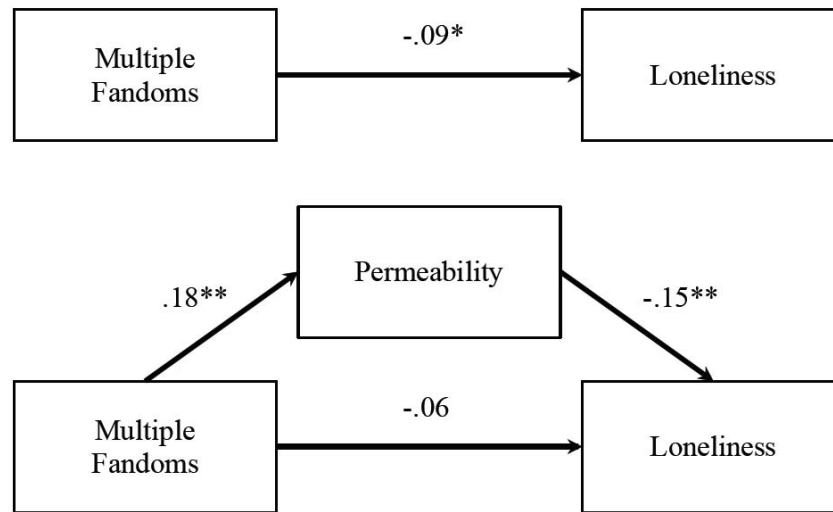
Figure 1. Permeability of group boundaries mediating the relationship between greater number of fandom memberships and loneliness in the brony fandom. Standardized betas presented. * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01.

Williams ("Post-Object Fandom," "Starting at the End") suggests that the end of a television show can leave fans with both an emotional and identity void leading to feelings similar to grief. The end of a fandom may also result in the loss of valued friendships, a valued identity, and the experience of loneliness. At the time of this study, bronies knew that the source of canonical content and the largest fan convention – BronyCon – was ending. However, the fate of the fandom itself (e.g., other conventions, online groups) was up in the air. Past research shows that belonging to multiple groups (or roles) is generally related to better resiliency, including improved well-being (e.g., Ahrens and Ryff; Jones and Jetten) and less loneliness (Haslam, et al. "GROUPS 4 HEALTH"). When things are going bad for one role or identity, people can turn to other roles/identities for a self-esteem boost or for social support (e.g., Chang, et al.).

In line with this research, we predicted and found that bronies who were members of multiple fandoms reported reduced loneliness at this potentially upsetting time in the fandom. Furthermore, we reasoned that bronies who belonged to multiple fandoms consider it easier to exit the brony community, in no small part because they would be less lonely if they left, since they would presumably have friendship networks in other fandoms. The results suggest that belonging to other

fandoms and perceiving that leaving the group would be easy predicted lower loneliness at a time when the outcome of the fandom was uncertain.

Batchelor describes popular culture as "the connections that form between individuals and objects" (1). Reysen and Branscombe distinguish between fanship – degree of psychological connection with their object of interest – and fandom – degree of psychological connection with other fans of the same interest. Within psychology these constructs have relied on the theoretical backing of a social identity perspective (Tajfel and Turner; Turner, et al.). Fanship reflects a personal identity and helps distinguish one individual from another (e.g., "I really like anime compared to a person who does not") or an individual within a group (e.g., "I am a bigger fan of anime than you are"). Fandom reflects a collective or social identity (e.g., "We anime fans dislike sports"). From a social identity perspective, greater identification with the object or the group represents the extent that individuals are incorporating the object/group into the self-concept. For example, Smith and Henry asked participants to complete a reaction time task to categorize traits (e.g., spiteful, creative) as part of the self. Traits that were more closely connected to the prototype of the ingroup were more quickly and accurately tied to the self. In other words, and in support of a social identity perspective, groups that we belong to become part of the self.

A similar process likely also occurs with parasocial connections. In this instance fans can experience a degree of psychological connection with an individual or character – albeit a one-sided relationship. Rather than the fan object or the fan group, individuals are connecting with a character. However, the exact type of relationship may differ for parasocial connections. Reysen, et al. ("Sex Differences in Parasocial Connection") asked a sample of anime fans to complete various, short measures of parasocial connection regarding their favorite character. A factor analysis showed three dimensions of parasocial connection: identification (e.g., wishful identification, emotional and cognitive empathy, self-expansion), romance (sexual attraction, perception that a character could be a romantic partner), and similarity (e.g., background and attitudinal similarity). Thus, for parasocial connections the dimensions of connection may differ from other types of identification. That said, we suggest that a similar underlying mechanism is present in that there is a connection with the character in which the fan incorporates the character into the self-concept.

A social identity perspective suggests that individuals seek to join and maintain group memberships that are positive and distinct. Researchers have suggested that

this focus on belonging to positively distinct groups is related to individuals' personal and collective self-esteem. If one's favorite team is winning games, the fan feels as though they are winning. If a favorite actor has a leading role in a popular movie, fans of that actor experience that success as their own. In their infamous series of studies on basking in reflected glory, Cialdini, et al. show that when one's self-esteem is threatened (vs. not), fans will connect themselves to their university football team, especially if that team recently won a game. The evidence tends to point toward fans using fan interests as a way to regulate their self-esteem. The results of the present study contribute to this line of research by showing how fandoms can buffer a blow to one's well-being, in this case loneliness, by jumping to another fan interest when one is ending. Indeed, more broadly the results suggest that popular culture can be influential in one's well-being, and that having a broad range of interests can be beneficial.

Limitations

The results of the present study are limited in several important ways. First, the present study was correlational, and therefore causal relationships cannot be ascertained. There is a possibility, for example, that being lonely leads people to join more fandoms. However, based on experimental research (Haslam et al., "GROUPS 4 HEALTH") we suspect that group membership predicts less loneliness. Second, this research may only relate to bronies and only at this specific period of flux and uncertainty for the fandom. Plante, et al. ("Interaction of Socio-Structural Characteristics"), for example, did not observe a relationship between permeability and self-esteem (an indicator of well-being), although the fan group in question was not facing an uncertain future. Similarly, as noted by Reysen, et al. ("Transported to Another World") anime fans may not experience loneliness as suggested by parasocial breakup researchers (Eyal and Cohen) after a show ends or a major character dies as fans in that community are used to switching shows continually (as most shows only last one season for 12-13 episodes). As such, the results observed here may represent an idiosyncrasy of the brony fandom at this specific point in time or may generalize only to fandoms based around a single source of canon which has recently come to an end. Despite this limitation, however, the results provide an interesting look at a possible factor, branching out and belonging to other fandoms, that may buffer fans against fan loneliness when a show ends.

Conclusion

To conclude, in the present research we tested a mediation model of multiple fandom membership on loneliness through perceived permeability of group boundaries. The results suggested that bronies with greater fandom membership experienced less loneliness through viewing it as relatively easy to leave the community. The results highlight the benefits of belonging to more than one fandom, as well as the general well-being benefits of fan group membership. All shows eventually end and not every fandom linked to those shows will live on. The results of this study suggest that finding and creating social connections within multiple fandoms can aid in buffering potential loss if a show or major fan event ends. Given the ubiquity of fandom and the influence of fan consumption on one's self and identity, greater research is needed regarding the psychological mechanisms of how people engage with popular culture.

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Fear Not, True Believers: Exploring Network Structures Among Characters in the Marvel Comic Universe

CALEB T. CARR[1]

Comics as a Research Paradigm or "Journey into Mystery"

Comic books are an oft-discounted literary tool, passed by as simplistic reading for children (Ndalianis). However, recent years have seen a marked increase in the awareness of comics and their super-powered *dramatis personae*. Even as the print comic industry financially struggles and seeks to reinvent itself (Salkowitz; Elbein), the return of characters both popular (e.g., Superman, Spiderman, Joker) and obscure (e.g., Emma Frost, Deadpool, Ra's al Ghul) to cinemas and television screens has been linked to an increase in issue sales of their print counterparts (Lucas; Cox and Steinberg). One reason for comics' resolute cultural import is they afford a rich look at how authors and artists interpret contemporary structures, often reflecting cultural values and our understanding of society (Facciani, Warren and Vendemia). For example, comics – particularly Marvel comics – were early bastions of depictions of inclusion and acceptance of non-majority or stigmatized peoples (Muszynsky), dealing with issues including racism (Taylor), sexual orientation (Taylor; Bendis), and gender identity (Pollack), both allegorically and explicitly. Particularly as young readers often use behaviors and frameworks depicted in comics to model and interpret social order (Xu, Perkins and Zunich), the societal influence of comic books should not be readily dismissed.

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Of particular interest to the present work is the manifestations of characters' affiliations and organizations: how superheroes' and supervillains' groups are formed, maintained, and spanned by individual members. This interest is particularly germane as comics increasingly reflect collaborations among characters. Comics have long emphasized collaborations among characters (Baker); but the last decade has seen the formula for mainstreaming superheroes change, as popular films and comic storylines have focused less on a maverick main character in favor of crossovers and team efforts. Even multi-title crossovers have become common, as publishers attempt to boost sales via interesting and storyline-spanning groupings (Elbein). Perhaps nothing exemplifies comics' emphasis on collaboration and organizational structures than the 2019 release of the *Avengers: Endgame* movie, featuring a team-up of previously-solo superheroes including Iron Man, Black Widow, Thor, Captain America; as well as 32 other heroes from across the various franchises comprising the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Yet interest in comic team-ups should be more than commercially-driven, as collaborations among heroes (and villains) has been a staple – and often focal point – of comic books (Jozwiak). And though much has been said about comics and their cultural impacts, the networks among comic characters remains undertheorized and explored. Given this, the present work seeks to go beyond understanding how in-comic networks drive sales or marketing, and instead seeks to reveal what makes certain superheroes (and supervillains) so prone to collaboration. Approaching this issue by applying social network theory and analysis can reveal and help theorize some of the structural and individual properties of superhero networks in ways that have not been previously well-detailed. Such an exploration is useful to understand how characters in comics are used and relate; but also presents a means of applying and testing theories of networks that may be challenging in real world organizations.

Organizational Collaboration and Structures or "To Me, My X-Men"

Collaboration among individuals allows groups to accomplish goals that may not be met individually (Wittenbaum, Vaughan and Strasser). Organizations benefit from the coordinated actions of their members pursuing mutual goals, benefiting from collective (rather than individualistic) efforts of their members (Marwell and Oliver). Early paradigms exploring collaboration focused on how members within an organization maximized productivity and production (Weber). Later traditions

such as relational perspectives (Rogers and Kincaid) and network analysis (Monge and Contractor; Wasserman and Faust) have focused instead on the dynamic structures that are created and emerge as individuals interact, both internally and externally of the organization, creating links within and beyond their organizations.

Interorganizational linkages – the individuals who connect two or more organizations – allow an organization to more readily transfer resources, including financial, physical, and social capital (Burt; Williamson), as well as increase exchange alternatives through increased network links (Pfeffer and Salanick). Individuals connecting organizations and enabling resource transference are said to fill linking roles and serve as structural mechanisms in interorganizational relationships. The complex roles and relations of linking individuals has been the subject of much academic interest, particularly when exploring the social structure of networks and their interactions and interactions.

Network Ties in Organizations or "Bodyslide by Two." Granovetter discussed two types of linking roles an individual may fill in any social structure: either strong or weak ties. Strong ties are the individuals with whom one frequently interacts, like coworkers. Contrarily, weak ties are individuals more likely to link one to new and unexpected opportunities and ideas, like a colleague at a competing firm. These ties have often been addressed with respect to Putnam's idea of social capital, in that these ties are often used to facilitate the exchange of resources and information within a network. Specifically, strong ties often manifest as bonding capital – dense networks effective at, "undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity" (Putnam 22). Weak ties often manifest as bridging capital – broader networks that facilitate membership with multiple social groups and reciprocity. Putnam noted bridging ties are better for linking external assets and information diffusion.

A particularly germane field of research has focused on the effect of board interlock, the process by which an executive of one organization sits on the board of directors of another organization (Mizruchi). Interlocks serve as interorganizational bridging ties, important for the transfer of information and resources, including facilitating the transfer of physical capital or resources under conditions of economic or environmental crisis (Doerfel et al.) or situational complexity (Keats and Hitt). Interlocks can also help diffuse an idea through network interlinks, such as the intentional dissemination of a 'poison pill' (i.e., negative information about a firm under threat of being purchased by a hostile buyer) to artificially inflate a firm's acquisition cost beyond the financial resources of the hostile buyer (Davis).

Recent scholarship has considered the personal and network characteristics of board interlocks, and weak ties more broadly. Shropshire proffered that network members demonstrating greater organizational tenure, centrality, and breadth of experience should positively influence an organization's diffusion of practices; while network members demonstrating greater conformity and homogeneous behaviors should decrease the organizational diffusion of practices. While theoretically guided and demonstrating high face validity, testing the relative effects of characteristics identified by Shropshire may be methodologically problematic. Given the difficulty of gathering data about all members across multiple organizations, one significant methodological challenge to testing such propositions is the need to census each board interlock member's networks to fully assess relative influences between and within each network.

As Wasserman and Faust noted, bounding a network can be a difficult task, with one requisite of a comprehensive analysis of the interplay of actors in a network being a census of individuals. This challenge is evident in many social network analyses, which are unable to fully map networks due to time and budgetary limitations as well as lack of subject participation. For example, Frank and Yasumoto's network analysis of interactions within the elite French banking system was conducted with a sample of only twenty-eight bankers. Similarly, Carr and Zube's study of in- and out-of-game interactions of members of a *World of Warcraft* guild was constrained to a single guild, and the researchers noted their findings may not generalize to other guilds in *World of Warcraft* or other online multiplayer games. As these two studies exemplify, prior studies of boundary spanners in real world networks have been limited by challenges in obtaining a network census. Comics offer a means of overcoming these limitations by enabling a complete census of network members, and concurrently applying theoretically-guided principles to empirically explore and understand the complex networks occurring in comics.

Network Ties in Comics or "Avengers Assemble." Teamwork and collaborations among comic characters is, "a process of conflict and compromise for the greater good of either the superhero team or society at large" (Jozwiak 326). And yet the processes and paths of these affiliations remain largely unexplored. Some preliminary work has sought to merely map ego networks in comics (Davletov) or focus only on a subset of comic characters (e.g., heroes; Shi, Yu and Ren). However, as detailed and complete analyses of networked interactions can reveal undiscovered or hidden patterns of interactions and implications for how

audiences may assimilate content depicted in mass media (Tan, Ujum and Ratnavelu), exploring the associations across an entire comic universe using network theory can reveal and help understand the myriad affiliations in which comic characters engage.

Perhaps because of how often comic characters are faced with both internal conflict and world-, universe-, or reality-ending threats (Isaak), comic characters often affiliate with multiple groups, sometimes even altering alignments (e.g., from "good" to "evil" and/or back). For example, in his 47-year publication history, Wolverine has been a member of 15 groups including the X-Men, Alpha Flight, the Avengers, and Apocalypse's Horsemen. Wolverine's proclivity to join and leave teams is so great that Spencer recently depicted Wolverine as errantly forgetting he had been affiliated with a particular group (see Figure 1). A character like Wolverine, who has been affiliated with multiple groups, may be considered to possess a high outdegree: the number of links between the actor and other actors (Brass). Outdegree has been shown to correlate with an individual's indegree (Mislove et al.), which refers to the "number of nodes that are adjacent to [an actor]" (Wasserman and Faust 126). In the present work, outdegree represents the number of organizations with whom a character is associated, and indegree represents the number of other characters with whom that character is connected through their mutual membership with an organization. As such, outdegree conceptually reflects the individual's ability to access resources within a network through network ties (Martinez et al.).

Figure 1. Wolverine has been on so many teams, he has forgotten some of them. From Spencer's *Giant Size Amazing Spider-Man #1*

Recalling Shropshire's characteristics predicting positive outcomes from bridging ties, outdegree should be positively correlated with centrality: how central a character is within a network. Among other measures of centrality (e.g., betweenness centrality, degree centrality), this work specifically considers closeness centrality, or how accessible and connected an individual is to all other members of the network (Wasserman and Faust). A character with great closeness centrality in the Marvel Universe would require fewer steps to access any given other member of the Universe, and thus that character should be able to more readily influence the network. Further, outdegree should be closely related to an individual's breadth of experience (Shropshire), as individuals with greater experience are expected to possess more diverse networks, and therefore greater outdegrees. Though demonstrating high face validity, it important to validate Shropshire's assertions through hypothesis testing. These assertions can be hypothesized in comics, just as they could in real world organizations. Thus, it is predicted:

> H1: A character's outdegree is positively correlated with the character's closeness centrality.
>
> H2: A character's outdegree is positively correlated with the character's network experience.

Though previous studies have attempted to identify the characteristics of network actors that predict the actors' outdegrees, including narcissism and emotiveness (e.g., Clifton, Turkheimer and Oltmanns), such studies have been hindered by methodological limitations on the network structure, particularly the inability to take a census of an organization's internal and external stakeholders. Consequently, an initial area of inquiry for this research is to inductively evaluate other characteristics of actors with high outdegrees beyond the two a priori hypotheses, guiding the study's research question:

> RQ: What characteristics are shared by characters in the Marvel universe with high outdegrees of connectedness?

Method or "Excelsior!"

Data Collection or "Flame On!" To understand how comic characters interact, it is first needed to know the entire cast of characters and whom interacts with whom. Marvel Comics was selected as a population from which to draw, due to its large character base, long publication history, and frequent crossover of characters. As

Marvel Comics utilizes a multiverse (alternate realities), characters were drawn from Earth-616, "The primary continuity in which most Marvel titles take place" (Wikipedia), to minimize and account for continuity issues across its titles.[2] Examination of the characters and their affiliations in Marvel's Earth-616 universe therefore presents a large, yet bounded, dataset from which to draw.

Data were obtained via the fan-authored and Marvel-monitored Marvel Comic Database[3] (MCD). The MCD comprehensively catalogs characters in the Marvel Universe, including its comic, television, and cinematic properties. An automated Python program was designed and used to fetch, parse, and structure information from the MCD. This program scoured the Character pages of all individuals listed in the MCD, obtaining selected information for each character, including the character's name, group affiliation(s), alignment, first appearance, and Universe (as Marvel's comics span transfinite realities across the multiverse). The initial scrape of the MCD Character pages provided information for 10,568 individuals. However, as this research focused on individuals' associations within and among groups, only characters with at least one identified affiliation were used in analysis. Thus, the resulting data set[4] is comprised of 3,697 characters in the "Earth-616" universe.

Data Preparation or "It's Clobberin' Time." After completing the data collection, data were structured so that each character was matched with the specific organization(s) with which they were affiliated. Next, the NodeXL program (Smith et al.) was then used to construct a network graph of connections, with groups as the nodes of connection. In addition to creating a graphic representation of the network map of affiliations in the Marvel Universe[3], the NodeXL program also calculated social network analysis metrics for each character (including the character's closeness centrality and outdegree), which were then imported into SPSS (v. 19.0.0) for additional analysis and hypothesis testing.

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[2] Although a handful of characters (e.g., Dark Beast, X-Man Nate Grey, Sugar Man) have moved between Marvel universes, limiting analysis to a single continuity helps reflect a more natural structure of interaction, focusing as well on more sustained character development and processes than may occur in the television or film versions of characters.

[3] http://marvel.wikia.co

[4] Supplemental material, including data and network graph of Marvel characters, are available (and blinded) at: https://osf.io/7k9ep/?view_only=d820920f87884c3b918a635a1eaad855

Measures or "To Me, My Board." Closeness centrality, or how centrally located the character is within the holistic Marvel Universe, reflects the range of an actor's influence.[5] A character's outdegree was operationalized as the number of group with which that character had been affiliated, and can be considered as a measure of the breadth of connections made by a character (Wasserman and Faust).

A character's network experience was operationalized as the time an actor had been active in the network (Doreian), herein as the months since the character's first publication appearance. The character's first appearance was also scraped from the MCD and calculated as the number of months between first publication and the month of data collection. Characters' network experience ranged from 1 month to 864 months[6], reflecting Marvel's 72-year publication history (beginning as Timely Publications) to when data were collected.

Analyses or "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility"

The first hypothesis predicts a positive correlation between a character's outdegree and closeness centrality. Linear regression analysis was conducted with a character's outdegree serving as the dependent variable and the character's closeness as the independent variable, and was significant.[7] A character's closeness was significantly, but negatively, associated with the character's outdegree.[8] Counter to the direction predicted by H1, a one-unit increase in a character's centrality typically correspond with a 0.15-unit decrease of the character's outdegree. In other words, as characters were more central to the Marvel Comic network they were typically a member of fewer organizations.

The second hypothesis predicts a positive correlation between a character's outdegree and network experience. Marvel introduced a huge number of characters in the early 1960s (later dubbed the "Marvel Age" due to the numerous and popular characters created, particularly between 1961 and 1964; Jozwiak; DeFalco; Baker), which was reflected in the distribution characters' experience. Because characters'

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[5] Specifically, closeness centrality refers to those network actors (j) who are reachable from the actor (i) in a finite number of steps (Wasserman and Faust).

[6] ($M = 436.08$, $SD = 415.70$)

[7] $F(1, 3695) = 86.78$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .02$

[8] $\beta = -.15$

experience was not normally distributed,[9] attempting to fit a linear regression line to the data may not reflect the best fit. Therefore, data were fit to a quadratic model, predicting a character's outdegree from network experience. The quadratic model better-fit the data than the linear model,[10] and demonstrated a significant positive correlation between network experience and outdegree,[11] so that for every one month in which a character has been active in the Marvel Universe corresponds with a small but significant .05-unit increase of the character's outdegree. In other words, Marvel comic characters become affiliated (on average) with about one additional organization for every two years of their publication history, supporting H2.

The research question asked what characteristics are shared by characters with high outdegrees. Outdegree coefficients for characters in this sample ranged from one to seventeen,[12] and 90% of characters were affiliated with three or fewer groups. Ordering characters by descending outdegree allowed identification of the characters with highest outdegree. Table 1 presents the Marvel comic characters the highest outdegrees, displaying the 49 characters affiliated with at least nine organizations.

While it is enticing to attempt to categorize characters with high outdegrees based on superpowers, such categorization may not be particularly useful or generalizable: A team of like-powered heroes or villains makes for bad storytelling and stymies opportunities to capitalize on the holism enabled by organizational collaboration. Instead, to answer the research question, commonalities based on personal traits, interpersonal characteristics, and the nature of groups with which that character affiliates were considered as a more meaningful way to respond to the research question. That said, it is notable many of the characters identified in Table 1 lack some of the most common superpowers, like speed or flight. Rather, characters with high degrees of connection were often prolific combatants, either as melee fighters (e.g., hand-to-hand fighting, swordsmanship; including

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[9] $D(.37) = .18, p < .001$

[10] $F(2, 3694) = 29.26, p < .001, R^2 = .02, \Delta R^2 = .01$

[11] $\beta = .002, p < .001$

[12] This distribution was both positively skewed (skewness = 3.38, se = .04) and leptokurtic (kurtosis = 14.71, se = .08).

Swordsman, Wolverine, Psylocke, and Black Knight) or as ranged combatants (e.g., marksmanship; including Black Widow, Viper, and Hawkeye).

Character	Outdegree	Character	Outdegree
Black Widow	17	Multiple Man	10
King Namor	16	Mystique	10
Swordsman	16	White Queen	10
Viper	15	Executioner	9
Psylocke	15	Golden Girl	9
Wolverine	15	Sentry	9
Human Torch	14	Loki	9
Banshee	13	Archangel	9
Razorfist	13	Professor X	9
U.S. Agent	13	Juggernaut	9
Beast	12	Havok	9
Hawkeye	12	Sunfire	9
Constrictor	12	Red Wolf	9
Black Knight	11	Mockingbird	9
Crimson Dynamo	11	Blackwing	9
Iron Fist	11	Storm	9
Ms. Marvel	11	Nova	9
Taskmaster	11	Eel	9
Sunspot	11	War Machine	9
Skids	11	Magma	9
Grim Reaper	11	Cannonball	9
Cable	11	Mirage	9
Thing	10	Wolfsbane	9
Enchantress	10	Boom-Boom	9
Atlas	10		

Table 1. Marvel comic characters with highest outdegree coefficients (representing largest number of group affiliations)

Discussion or "Imperious Rex"

What makes for a good superpowered collaborator? As team ups become more popular in comics, television shows, movies, and other media, there remains a need to understand which characters are effective collaborators and why. Responding to this need, the present research employed social network analysis to assess

organizational networks occurring within the Marvel comic universe. This network analysis revealed which individuals serve as bridging ties by spanning multiple groups, and help reveal how comic characters collaborate. Counter to H1, characters less central within the Marvel Universe are connected to more groups; but characters tend to affiliate with more groups over time, consistent with H2. Implications of findings, as well as some of the traits shared by the most-connected characters, are discussed below.

Traits Of Structural Bridges or "Welcome to The Team, Hope You Survive the Experience." What makes a character a likely group-spanning team member in the comics? The most affiliatory characters – those associating with the greatest number of groups over their publication history – were revealed to typically be loners, considered "good," and have a moderate publication history. These findings are detailed below, as well as their implications for our understanding of comics and beyond.

Bridges Are Loners or "Leave Hulk Alone." Of immediate note is the paradoxical finding that many characters with highest outdegrees (i.e., affiliated with the largest number of groups) are typically considered misanthropic characters, often preferring to work alone.[13] Most of the highest-connected characters actually prefer to operate in isolation, working solo and not making strong, permanent ties with individuals and groups. At first look, this desire to isolate or work alone is at tension with spanning of multiple groups. However, functional and structural explanations may both account for the paradox of loners as bridges.

A functional explanation of this paradox is that characters who possess unique skill sets are required for specific missions, leading the characters to briefly associate with a group to accomplish a particular goal or fix an internal process within the organization, only to disaffiliate upon completing that task to return to individualistic work. Loners would thus be highly-connected across multiple organizations, but only for short terms or as *ad hoc* members, as groups were in temporary need of their unique skills. Characters such as King Namor (ruler of the kingdom of Atlantis) and Beast (a renown bio-geneticist) can bring unique individual characteristics to bear to address specific situations (e.g., mobilizing Atlantis' military, curing a genetic disease), and then leave the group.

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[13] There are notable exceptions of sociable individuals in Table 1, including two of the Fantastic Four (Human Torch and the Thing) and several X-Men (e.g., Banshee, Beast, Professor X).

A structural explanation of the paradox of loners as bridges is that amiable characters may be ensconced in their established groups, and thus less likely to interact with outside networks. For example, as a founding member of the Fantastic Four, Reed Richards (aka "Mr. Fantastic") has been closely and tightly associated with that team since its inception. Though he has occasionally lent his expertise and membership to other organizations (e.g., the Illuminati, Defenders), Reed Richards typically returns to the Fantastic Four. As a literal and figurative father figure to the Fantastic Four, Mr. Fantastic is a central and tightly-connected member within the Fantastic Four network with few connections to other organizations. Such a hypothesis is born out in the data, as characters' centrality closeness were negatively associated with their outdegrees.[14] Individuals more tightly connected intraorganizationally were less likely to be connected interorganizationally, so that once established and ingrained within a particular organization – even one central to the broader Marvel universe – they are less likely to leave that organization and seek out new group memberships.

For both explanatory paths, that misanthropes make for better bridging ties provides insight and parallels into the patterns of both real and fictitious networks. Loner comic characters may use their fewer close interpersonal ties to more effectively traverse broader organizational networks and access the resources of other groups, just as outcasts in organizations tend to span broader and more heterophilous networks (Kleinbaum; Kalish and Robins). Thus, counterintuitively, less-sociable characters may make for the best team-ups, helping introduce new skills, resources, and perspectives into a group. The trend in many cultural artifacts from movies to comics toward less traditional protagonists reflects this relationship. As misanthropes (e.g., Moon Knight, Joker) and antiheros (e.g., Deadpool, Harley Quinn) increasingly find themselves starring in solo titles, movies, and television shows, this may be in part because their more antisocial tendencies help prevent having a persistent cast of supporting characters, thereby inviting more frequent use of new characters. In other words, by not having to focus on the Fantastic Four each week/movie/issue, writers and consumers alike can continuously find new stories, situations, and (critically) collaborations to narratively explore. An additional implication here is that by presenting bridging characters not as the most central to the network, but rather than those with the most to offer various groups, comics may continue to be voices for the underrepresented (Bryan). Depicting Superman

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[14] $r(3697) = -.15, p < .001$

as a team player is easy, in part because Superman conforms to so many societal norms and ideals. Presenting less-conforming characters like Loki and Boom Boom as individuals that may thrive by virtue of their ability to cross boundaries and align with numerous groups (rather than a single group membership), comics may create for readers a view of a world in which diverse and nonnormative individuals may be embraced and valued precisely because of their ability to interface with and benefit multiple affiliations.

Finding that loners are intensive collaborators also helps understand real world interactions within organizations. For example, a *turnaround specialist* refers to upper-level managers (particularly CEOs) briefly hired to underperforming organizations due to the individual's particular ability to positively affect organizational change and restore organizational performance and profitability (Fredenberger and Hoy). Turnaround specialists often do not remain in the organization after it resumes its normal performance level, leaving the organization for another failing business and allowing the former organization to hire on a full-time manager to replace the turnaround specialists (Boyd). As such, in organizations – just as in super-teams – individuals are sometimes needed for isolated brief collaborations to capitalize on their unique skill sets, after which they are again free agents, able to seek their next membership. Likewise, managers are highly-central within their own organization, and thus are less likely to be connected to outside organizations (Sozen, Basim and Hazir). This situates managers as bonding (rather than bridging) ties because of their ability to transfer resources internally rather than bring in new information or skills. From this work, organizations can learn from comics the value of bridging ties as means of effective resource transfer both into and out of the organization. Employees who may not be strongly connected within an organization's network may actually be very connected to other organizations within the industry, and thus be able to bring in new information or resources; and managers would do well to consider that some of the more valuable (from a network perspective) comic characters are those that may not be the most deeply integrated into a single organization.

Bridges Are Good or "Let Us Make Good." Characters who were more connected were also more likely align with "good" supergroups. Thirty of the 49 most-affiliatory characters are heroes, whereas only 12 were villains (the remaining 8 were neutrally-aligned). A *post hoc* ANOVA revealed alignment-based

differences in outdegree across all Marvel characters were statistically significant.[15] One reason for this disparate distribution is that "good" supergroups typically engage their communities in addition to saving the world, and thus provide opportunities for extra-organizational interaction. Contrarily, "evil" groups of supervillains often pursue more myopic goals such as bank robbing or world domination, which may not provide similar opportunities for networking. Comics (as well as other media) may thus seek opportunities to tell stories of team-ups that may feature more interactions among members beyond of their formal organizational duties. Even less-fantastic stories where characters – both good and evil – help rebuild buildings or come together to support a community (e.g., Straczynski) can be engaging tales and opportunities for both character exploration and for otherwise unconnected characters to collaborate and make connections.

The proclivity of heroes to ally more than villains may also be that comic books tend to focus on heroes over their foes. While a few antagonists and antiheros have had their own (often short-lived) titles (e.g., Joker, Magneto, Venom), comics tend to focus on good heroes. Writers' desire (or demand) tell the stories of good – rather than evil – characters may simply provide more opportunities for champions to affiliate more, relegating evil team ups (e.g., Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, Sinister Six, Legion of Doom) to second-class storylines threaded through the tales of super hero team ups. Stories focused on heroes simply provide more opportunities for those heroes to interact and affiliate.

Bridges Have Been Around for A Moderate Amount of Time or "Try Not to Die." Finally, well-connected comic characters have typically had longer publication histories, providing them time to affiliate with more groups. As evidenced in the testing of H2, there exists a positive ∩-shaped relationship between tenure and outdegree. In other words, the characters with the highest number of affiliations are not those with the longest or shortest time active in the Marvel-616 universe, but rather those in the middle of the distribution. Some of this may be due to the "Marvel Age" of comics introducing many now-classic characters in a short time span. A five-year period in the early-1960s saw the introduction of the *Fantastic Four, X-Men, Spider-Man, Thor, Hulk,* and dozens other heroes and villains who remain Marvel's best-known characters to-date (Baker). Many Silver Age characters remain popular, and thus exert a disproportionate pull on network connections. Older (i.e., Golden Age) characters

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[15] $F(2, 3694) = 9.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .01$. This small effect is likely due to the large sample size.

such as Ka-Zar and the android Human Torch have seen little use after being supplanted by Silver Age characters, and newer characters have not had time to join multiple organizations. This effect of a character's tenure on collaboration opportunities may be something to consider moving forward. Naturally, writers want to introduce collaborations among characters that are time-tested and audience-vetted, and collaborations among newer characters may not engage audiences not broadly familiar with the whole of a publisher's catalog. However, perhaps as online tools and fan-campaigns can quicken the process of a character's recognition, we may see characters with a shorter publication history be quickly embraced by audiences and the fandom and more immediately written into collaborative circumstances with multiple groups. The surprising popularity of Squirrel Girl (Ditko and Murray) may indicate an interesting character can be quickly identified by fans and readily incorporated into other supergroups.

Beyond the artifact of publication history, this curvilinear relationship may reflect some of the structural processes occurring in organizations more generally. Individuals initially joining an organization typically have few interorganizational network ties, as new members are typically focused on creating initial ties with intraorganizational ties. Alternately, those members who have been with an organization for a long time may see a decline in their interorganizational networks, as their tenure is typically associated with higher centrality within their own network (Liu, Ge and Peng). However, individuals with moderate organizational tenure, such as middle managers, typically engage in the most boundary-spanning activities, serving as both intraorganizational and interorganizational bridges (Pappas and Wooldridge). Consistent with these real-world findings, time within Marvel comics lets individual characters affiliate with more groups, though characters' group memberships seem generally stable after about 40 years.

Understanding Networks Or "My Spider Sense Is Tingling." A secondary contribution of this work to the field is methodological, helping evidence new means of testing theory and evaluating social network analyses in both intraorganizational and interorganizational collaborations. Interactions in popular media often reflect properties of real world networks (Tan, Ujum and Ratnavelu; Alberich, Miro-Julia and Rosselló), and can thus help overcome limitations in testing social network processes and influences in hard-to-access censuses of actual organizations (Wasserman and Faust). Using automated data collection techniques to obtain complete network affiliations and associations (often available on publicly-available social media as well as on proprietary enterprise social media;

Leonardi, Huysman and Steinfield), this study employs a novel means to collect data and test theory across broad, interconnected networks. For example, findings empirically supported several of Shropshire's propositions regarding the personal characteristics of board interlocks, including individuals with greater network experience have greater outdegree coefficients. Empirically demonstrating experience working within and across organizations often leads to increased ties relationship supports earlier theorizing that time in an industry will naturally lead to greater opportunities to encounter other network members, thereby increasing an individual's ability to span groups (Shropshire; Frank, Zhao and Borman). As scholars increasingly turn toward tools like server scraping and user logs to obtain data (Williams), tools for automating identifying complex network structures reflect emergent means of not only collecting data often unobtainable via surveys or interviews, but also reflect means of acquiring large sample populations from which social network analysts can obtain precise data about the associations and behaviors within complete networks.

Conclusion Or 'Nuff said

A popular culture text often discounted by society (and even academics), comics can provide a unique and insightful perspective into how society recognizes and structures itself (Facciani, Warren and Vendemia). Just as Darowski considered representations of race in comics, the present work considered representations of organizational structures in comics. Empirically testing network theories across an entire (albeit fictional) universe, this study helps reveal structural and individual properties that may shape the ever-increasing number of team-ups, crossovers, and collaborations that occur in the pages of Marvel comics and subsequent media (e.g., the Marvel Cinematic Universe, television shows). Counterintuitively, characters most prone to collaborate across larger networks were not innately 'team players,' powerhouses with the most destructive skill set, or even those with the longest publication history (e.g., the superspy [not winged] Angel, the mystic [not superspy] Black Widow). Instead, network analysis revealed (a) independent characters are more likely to bridge and connect networks and (b) there is a positive curvilinear relationship between organizational tenure and network spanning. Such findings help explain the popularity of current characters like Deadpool and Squirrel Girl: Such characters have been established and popularized, and prefer to run solo and thus are free to temporarily join up with Cable, Galactus, or Howard

the Duck for a single issue or brief story arc before returning to free agency. Rather than having to explain why Cyclops is teaming up with the Avengers without referencing other X-Men, Venom can be brought into or out of a group without additional explication (or licensing rights from Sony). Moving forward, writers, readers, and even managers may consider that the greatest collaborators may actually be some of those who seem to be least connected to the group.

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Derry Girls: A Postfeminist Catharsis

ZOË BACKWELL

Derry Girls (2018-2019) is of the moment: a wholesome family sitcom, not a traditional sitcom by any means (no laugh track or live audience), so far consisting of two series, each featuring six episodes running from twenty to thirty minutes. Set in Derry, Northern Ireland and written by Lisa McGee, *Derry Girls* has become the most-watched television series in Northern Ireland since modern records began in 2002 (Ryan). The show gives a comical insight into the lives of teenagers growing up in the 1990s against the backdrop of the Troubles, a thirty-year bout of violent conflict in Northern Ireland that claimed the lives of more than 3,500 people (McEvoy 1). It follows the lives of four girls and one boy growing up in Derry during the last few years of the Troubles. Checkpoints, bomb threats, and British soldiers are all commonplace but are often considered background static, or something that "gets in the way" of a more pressing and overcrowded family life.

Amid all the chaos, Lisa McGee never loses sight of whose story she is telling. Indeed, her magic is in the way she allows the characters to experience the usual awkwardness that defines one's teenage years without letting extraordinary times overshadow the hilariously ordinary things in life such as the humiliation of having a diary read aloud by a cousin. Storylines are realistic, witty, matter-of-fact, and above all, easy for every modern woman to identify with. They are bluntly humorous and touching at the same time (Ryan). McGee is sensitive to the cultural context of the times throughout the series while still centering attention on the usual trials and tribulations of a teenager's life. She focuses on those trivial but urgent matters that dominate their lives, with the added chaos of not being able to go to a Take That concert without being accompanied by army patrols and the possibility of violence.

Even against the backdrop of terrorism and political upheaval, the characters

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maintain tight friendships and the rebellious nature of their teenage days. Erin "know-it-all" Quinn (Saoirse-Monica Jackson), Orla "space cadet" McCool (Louisa Harland), Clare "goody-two-shoes" Devlin (Nicola Coughlan), Michelle "bad bitch" Mallon (Jamie Lee O'Donnell), and James "wee English lad" Maguire (Dylan Llewellyn), who plays Michelle's younger English cousin, make up the core teenage cast. James attends the girls' school, lacking in any men's restrooms, as his family fears that sending him to the local boys' school would be sentencing him to a life of constant bullying and beatings. The story is not over yet. Filming for the third series began in October 2021 and is set to air on BBC Channel 4 sometime in 2022. As Mills suggests, the ending is hard to place in a potentially endless series.

Sitcoms have a cultural and social impact on how we see the world and our societies. Because the genre is inherently temporal and effactually develops over time, it is embedded in the relationship between a text, its producers, and its receivers. Mittell argues that genre should be viewed as "a fluid and active process" (1), always ongoing, always open to reinterpretation, development and mutation, just like our cultural views and values. The greatest problem with much of genre theory, according to Mittell, is that genre is conflated with content. Instead, "the answer to what constitutes difference is what gives us the notion of genre" (Atallah qtd in Mittell 98). In other words: "If we conceive of genres as sites of tension between stability and change, then their role is aimed at both capturing and highlighting patterns of innovative thinking at the intersection between the expected and the unexpected" (Garzone qtd in Mittell 1). These parameters make a program such as *Derry Girls* part of the sitcom genre, parameters that are always being tested and redefined.

Just like our families look and behave differently from the way they did when the first family sitcom was aired (*The Goldbergs*, 10 January 1949 on CBS), so too does the relationship between series and audience. They no longer teach us how to be a "normal" family, but instead confirm our flaws and reveal our differences while supporting unconditional love at the heart of families (Dalton 45). In this way, a show such as *Derry Girls* mirrors where we are culturally and signifies that what people want is a sitcom that relates somewhat to reality, past or present. To put it simply:

> There are good ideas that have never been made because it wasn't the right moment, and quite often you just need things to align, so you need things to become relevant and something that wasn't relevant last year or the year before, for whatever reason, becomes relevant, or of the moment, which

unlocks it' (Brown 15).

The sitcom *Derry Girls* is a manifestation of postfeminism and in this context is a present-day catharsis to its viewers. This analysis draws on Rosalind Gill's theory of postfeminist sensibility to demonstrate how *Derry Girls* can be seen through a postfeminist lens and is a contemporary articulation of (contradictory) feminism(s) and femininity. Moreover, in this context, the show is cathartic both in how it reinserts women back into the canon and the Troubles narrative. It reconstructs notions of appropriate femininity and is powerful in its use of humor.

Derry Girls Is Postfeminism (As a Sensibility)

Using Rosalind Gill's *Postfeminist Media Culture* as a theoretical context, this section maintains that *Derry Girls* is a manifestation of postfeminism. It does so by looking at Gill's themes of femininity as a bodily property, the shift from the woman as a sex object to desiring social subject, and the reassertion of sexual difference.

By this, I do not necessarily situate postfeminism in any distinct wave but consider it, as Gill writes it is best understood, as a "distinct sensibility" ("Postfeminism and the New Cultural Life of Feminism" 147). A critical term, "postfeminist culture" according to Gill should be our object of analysis rather than perspective. Thus, postfeminism is understood not as an epistemological perspective, historical shift, or even as a backlash to other feminisms, but simply emphasizes the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist ideas. Since postfeminism is not against feminism but about feminism "today" (Brooks), it needs to be situated in the context of a contemporary neo-liberal, late-capitalist society characterized by consumer culture, individualism, humor, and post-modernism ("Adriaens, F. 2009. Post-Feminism in Popular Culture"). At heart, Gill's approach examines the question of what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media and emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses ("Postfeminist Media Culture" 147). Media discourses and popular culture play a crucial role in the representation, evolution, and development of this new feminism and a new, critical way of understanding the changed relations between feminism, popular culture and femininity ("Adriaens, F. 2009. Post-Feminism in Popular Culture").

Femininity as a Bodily Property. One such theme which runs throughout contemporary media, and indeed in *Derry Girls*, is the notion of femininity as a

bodily property rather than a social, structural, or psychological one. For several of the characters, a desirable physical appearance is presented as a women's key source of identity and power and requires constant consumer spending to conform to societal perceptions of female attractiveness: "it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy" (Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism" 616). Consumption within a neo-liberal context is a tool to achieve power and pleasure and acts as an alternative route for self-esteem. In this way, women construct their identity and receive societal appreciation through consumption (Featherstone qtd in Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility" 5). This is evident in "The Prom" when the girls buy dresses they cannot afford for the upcoming prom with the intention of returning them to the store afterwards.

Linked to this theme is the notion of individualism, choice, and empowerment; the reprivatization of issues and the notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourse. For example, Erin, a self-proclaimed free-thinking and empowered young woman, unwittingly gives in to socially constructed mass-mediated ideals of beauty that she internalizes and makes her own. Similarly, the girls are subject to (and subject each other to) scrutiny for their physical features and wardrobe malfunctions. For example, Claire often gets mocked for her outfit choices:

"No Michelle, this is wrong!"
"So are those ski pants, Claire, but it didn't stop ye pulling them over your
hole this morning" ("Episode #1.2" 00:19:02).

Aunt Sarah, James's mother who abandons him in the first episode of series one, in the series two finale comments repeatedly on Cathy's glorious eyebrows when she returns to recruit her son for her new business venture in "self-adhesive labels" ("The President"). She also remarks on the appearance of Maeve, Granda Joe's new lady friend, as if her hairstyle warranted a badge of honor: "I just want to say, although I'm not happy about this thing with me da, I have to give it to you, that is a cracker blow-dry" ("The President"). Aunt Sarah separates Maeve's self-expressions of femininity from their interpersonal relations. Although disapproving of her choice of companion, Aunt Sarah is appreciative of Maeve's consumption choices which are viewed as powerful markers of identity and individualism.

Also within the show is the contradictory acknowledgement that the body is a canvas that may not reflect how one truly feels inside (Gill, "Postfeminism and the New Cultural Life of Feminism" 150). We see this in "The Prom" when Erin feels

deflated and still decides get glammed up and attend the prom. According to Gill, this "cult(ure) of confidence" systematically calls a new kind of female subject into being. It urges women to believe that they are being held back not by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalized sexism, but by their lack of confidence; an entirely individual and personal matter unconnected to structural inequalities or cultural forces (Gill and Orgad 330).

From Sex Object to Desiring Social Subject. "We're doing it for peace all right… a piece of that fine Protestant ass" Michelle declares brazenly to her peers in response to Erin's rather unconvincing attempt to reassure her mother she's not participating in the peace-initiative to 'get off' with protestant boys ("Friends Across the Barricade" 00:04:10)**.** In an oppressed and constrained Catholic Ireland, women were constrained by fear, secrecy, and silence. Irish writer Nuala O'Faolain described Irish communities as being "savagely punitive", and for many years, "fully in the grip of an institutionalized fear of women; that is, of sexuality" (Ryan 94). The silencing of female sexuality, which was often equated with sin, meant that single mothers and other women who were seen to flaunt their sexuality were ostracized for their alleged deviant behavior. Both church and state maintained that women should hold a certain morality, particularly relating to areas of sexuality and reproduction (Ryan 93).

However, there has lately been an upending of the conversation and an increased consciousness surrounding the obstacles women encounter, both personal and professional. Women previously presented in the media as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze are now increasingly portrayed as having agency, freeing themselves of cultural and patriarchal taboos (Langone). In this era of empowerment, movements such as Time's Up and #MeToo, sexualization works differently. Females are shown to be "active, desiring sexual subjects who, if choosing to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner, do so because it is in their liberated interests to do so" (Goldman qtd in Gill "Postfeminism and the New Cultural Life of Feminism"). Women in *Derry Girls* are similarly depicted as strong, albeit morally conflicted, empowered, and eschewing victimization. For example, Michelle is a sexually autonomous young woman who plays with her sexual power and is 'forever up for it', freely expressing her teenage sexual drive (Gill, "Postfeminism and the New Cultural Life of Feminism" 151). In her usual brazen manner, Michelle unapologetically admits to her gawking at British soldiers while they inspect the school bus at a checkpoint: "Ach, some of them are rides, I'm willing to admit it, even if nobody else will, because I'm a beacon of truth"

("Episode #1.1" 00:10:10). Gill refers to this as to the shift from the male judging gaze to the self-policing, narcissistic gaze, an internalized male gaze where power is not imposed externally but constructs our very subjectivity (Gill, "Postfeminism and the New Cultural Life of Feminism" 8).

A Reassertion of Sexual Difference

Gill speaks about a reassertion of sexual difference as a characteristic of this postfeminist sensibility in which women control the stakes, and men are left walking on eggshells and on tenterhooks about their partner's inevitable furious response (Gill, "Post-Postfeminism?" 11). This difference is evident in *Derry Girls* like it is in several contemporary cultures: upgraded forms of sexual representation that depict women's objectification as a mode of empowerment, and in the repeated depiction of men as somewhat hapless, bumbling victims (Gill, "Post-Postfeminism?" 6). The first episode of series two shows Erin and the gang preparing for an outdoor pursuits peace-initiative for Friends Across the Barricade, a woeful attempt at social bonding between Catholic and Protestant students. There is an obvious commentary on their religious separation when they are given an exercise to give examples of the differences and similarities between Catholics and Protestants:

> Catholics really buzz off statues and we don't so much
>
> Protestants hate ABBA ("Friends Across the Barricade")

However, peace is hardly at the forefront of Michelle's mind once she finds out that there will be Protestant boys there. Instead, the view is focused on Erin and Michelle's failed attempts to seduce their male buddies: "I bagsy Harry..." / "That's not fair, he's the only good looking one!" ("Friends Across the Barricade" 00:09:21). Even in their failure to grasp the attention of a Protestant boy, the girls express a sexual power and confidence that inevitably one of them will end up with him, it being merely a case of whom.

Within the sitcom, there are moments of subtle feminism, and one might be forgiven for thinking it has moved beyond postfeminism. The characters tend to think and act communally rather than individually; they do not revel in pain or suffering (e.g., *Handmaid's Tale, OITNB*); and characters are not flattened or sexualized (*Mrs Browns Boys, Two and a Half Men*). There is a postfeminist entanglement: Michelle's unruly woman character shows traits of both feminism and postfeminism; Clare is obedient and a "wee lesbian"; and Derry is displaced

and conflict-ridden in contrast with the typical postfeminist romantic-comedy setting. Gill draws our attention to the entanglement of feminism with other ideas; she argues that some of what is celebrated today as feminism is shaped profoundly by postfeminist elements (McRobbie qtd in Gill "Post-Postfeminism?"). She calls on the need for approaches that appreciate the way multiple and contradictory ideas can co-exist "in the same moment, plane, field" (Gill, "Postfeminism and the New Cultural Life of Feminism" 2), emphasizing the need to be able to "think together" these contradictions and avoid being tempted by singular narratives (Gill "Postfeminism and the New Cultural Life of Feminism" 613). To say that something is postfeminist should be the starting point, not the end of the analytical process; it should open up rather than close down thinking.

Irony and Knowingness. Irony gives room to breathe. It allows a space for playfulness, openness, and a chance to test boundaries. Gill claims that irony is a diverse distancing practice that allows someone to "express an unpalatable truth in a disguised form" while claiming it is "not what they meant" (Virdis 44). For example, in postfeminist consumer culture irony is used to present sexist verbal and visual contents as inoffensive and intentional postmodern jokes. Should anyone find fault with the jokes, those people are deemed rigidly orthodox feminists and lacking a sense of humor. This is evident in the Wonderbra billboard advertisement of 1994 in which model Eva Herzigova glances down at her chest, the caption reading "Hello Boys". As McRobbie explains, the self-consciousness of the image implies it is void of any exploitation or sexism, and that the advert was created out of free will. Gill sees this as the foremost function of such 'risky' irony of entitlement in postfeminist culture: "a way of having it both ways" (McRobbie qtd in Missler 21). Similarly, Lockyer writes: "While a feminist discourse is drawn on as a system of representation that challenges the sexual objectification and subordination of women, it is repeatedly destabilized by the presence of oppositional discourses through the use of irony" (173). *Derry Girls* delivers when it comes to satirical storylines and ironic one-liners. For example, when Erin argues that Michelle cannot marry an Orangeman, she retorts "It's a pity, 'cos I think there's something really sexy about the fact that they hate us so much" ("Episode #1.5"). Despite their displays of confidence and intermittent celebration of single status, the rhetoric of their defiant and unapologetic expressions of teen sexual desire is somewhat destabilized by the show's ironic treatment of singlehood as an unremitting dilemma.

Catharsis. "Macaulay Culkin isn't a Protestant, ma!" ("Episode #1.1" 00:01:39).

An enraged Erin makes it known to her mother that she will no longer tolerate having her boundaries crossed. The last straw for the teenager is catching her cousin Orla reading her diary aloud - "what's next, I'll catch her tryin' on my knickers?!". She informs her mother that Macauley Culkin might be divorcing his parents, as "teenagers have rights now you know". Erin's mother asks if he is one of the protestants she met at the peace-initiative summer scheme.

Humor is a common form of storytelling-based catharsis in our society. Catharsis, according to Zeman, is "the act of purging emotional stress or releasing of pent-up emotions vicariously through watching others perform it inside of a narrative" (5.2.2). The sitcom's relational model insists on an intimacy between artist, medium, and audience. The sitcom is ours because it comes closer to showing us who we are. The temporal limitations that come with a twenty-minute episode result in a richer, fuller impact on the audience. Something is fulfilled in this relationship between viewer and sitcom – a relationship that depends upon consistency and catharsis (Martin). The ensemble element of the sitcom also provides a collection of smart, funny, and diverse female characters for viewers to identify with.

The juxtaposition of feminist theory and popular culture has an inevitable impact on the consumption of culture mainly because popular culture has the power to put up a mirror to our lives and show connections between media, socialization, and identity (Trier-Bieniek xiv). This is evident early on in *Derry Girls*, where distinct characters come to the fore each with their own moral conflicts making them utterly human and relatable. Comedy, in this way, provides one of the few artistic lenses through which an audience can view its own weaknesses and that of the world without "falling into nihilism and despair" (Martin). Moreover, "the better the catharsis, the better the entertainment we consider it" (Zeman). The characters, and writer/producer Lisa McGee, can move between the sentimental and the disengaged, thereby creating something not only entertaining but also spiritually enriching. Although McGee is committed to humorous delivery, it is evident that she also feels the weight of responsibility to tell an accurate story. For instance, in the final moments of the first series, the poignant juxtaposition of the light-hearted side of the show and the dark realities of growing up in Northern Ireland during the Troubles is accentuated by the intro music of "Dreams" by *The Cranberries*. It offers a moment of catharsis to its viewers, allowing them to achieve some degree of personal peace as well as creating the opportunity for public reflection.

Humor. Humor often works as an instrument of power to deliberately exacerbate or undermine hierarchal relations and their assumptions (Pailer 9). McGee has managed to write a poignant yet hilarious sitcom giving viewers a glimpse into post-conflict times from a woman's perspective. It depicts a true representation of sharp-witted Derry women in the backdrop of the Troubles, and this humor and satire is a big part of why the show is so cathartic and well-received. The sitcom has generated laughs all around the globe since it was first broadcast in January 2018 on BBC Channel 4 and on Netflix in December 2018. Its humor is so powerful that it transcends the boundaries of language. It allows the experience of growing up during the Troubles to be recognized from the perspective of young women in a sensitive yet hilarious manner. Many representations of women during these times show them falling apart in crisis, asking "What do we do now?".

Such does not happen in *Derry Girls*, where women are the pillars of society. The show does justice to women in sitcoms, women in general, and female writers; it represents a postfeminist transgression for women and humor, women who laugh and cry in the face of fear and dilemma. In this way, laughter is a form of liberation from and a way to transcend secular oppression. Pailer writes: "In modern fiction, readers are often confronted with women who theoretically could represent feminist role models but are instead ridiculed for their weaknesses, and their adherence to typically 'female' clichés are emphasized, exaggerated, and mercilessly exploited" (324). More often than not these female characters eventually turn out to be victims, but instead of winning the readers' admiration or pity, they become the laughingstock (i.e., Rachel Greene in *Friends* or Jessica Day in *New Girl).* In *Derry Girls,* it is the men who are the laughingstock and the token accessories, for instance Mary's husband or the "wee English lad" James, who take the brunt of the jokes. Pailer asserts that humor carries psychological relief and that maybe the time has come, a period of cultural unlock, in which: "Many people need a break from complex emotional topics and simply want to relax and laugh at something that they could only approach with high seriousness before. After the break, they can go back and continue the cause (324)." We only have to look at Sister Michael, the headmistress at Our Lady Immaculate College convent school, with her sarcastic one-liners and eye rolls to see that McGee wanted to inject some real comic relief into what for many people are repressive memories of a Catholic school system. Together, humor and the female perspective can help to unravel and disarm the dominant instruments of power at play. If we assume for a moment that humor and feminism share similar mechanisms, then we can deduce that both open up similar

possibilities, the access to "other sectors of reality" (Pailer 325). Working together, they can reinforce their potential and their power of revitalization and de-mechanization (324).

Nostalgia and Women Reinserted into the Troubles Narrative

Unlike traditional representations of adolescence marked by violence and sexual repression, *Derry Girls* reinserts women back into the narrative of the Troubles. During these times women were the backbone of the community and yet were the most isolated. Chinkin asserts that the peace process was a "top-down process" in which local communities and in particular women, were typically excluded and despite their contributions to informal peace processes, remained for the most part absent from the formal negotiations (Chinkin in Ward 2). Although the benefits of involving women in conflict resolution were evident in Northern Ireland, little was done to implement the pledges put forward in The Good Friday Agreement, also known as The Belfast Agreement, a peace agreement between the British and Irish governments signed on Good Friday, 10 April 1998, to ensure a greater level of gender parity in public life (Ward 4).

Women were the pioneers of peacemaking long before official peace negotiations began. They were actively building bridges between Catholics and Protestants and looked forward, coming up with solutions and strategies for healthcare and education, and developed a common cause that would eventually influence public opinion (Angon 34). Through dedication and cooperation, they represented a peaceful alternative showing that "coexistence is possible despite a bloody history" (Kvinna in Ward 8). As John Darby and Roger McGinty point out, militarism infiltrated Northern Irish society so that: "violence and its effects had worked their way into the very fabric of society and become part of normal life so that [people] became accustomed to the routine use of violence to determine political and social outcomes" (Ward 7). Female figures such as the McCartney sisters who began a campaign seeking the truth behind the murder of Robert McCartney in Belfast City in 2005, helped to open debate and reflection on the consequences of women's continued under-representation in public life and the nature of masculinity in a society that had been so profoundly marred by violence. The debate they helped start raised profound questions concerning the nature of post-conflict societies. Bernadette Devlin is another example of a female who was an important communicator for social change, who went largely unrecognized and

whose contribution to the Troubles was deleted from mainstream history. The key to sustainable peace then, according to Kvinna, lies in changing stereotyped gender roles and improving gender equality within the various sections of the community (Ward 5).

Peace, inclusivity, and equality is the legacy of Lyra McKee, a freelance journalist, writer, and social activist from Derry who was murdered in 2019 by indiscriminate fire as she covered a riot engineered by the so-called dissident IRA in Derry (National Union of Journalists). In her piece "Suicide of the Ceasefire Babies", McKee writes about the effect the war in Northern Ireland had on her generation growing up in Belfast following the Good Friday Agreement. She speaks about the number of young people taking their own lives in Northern Ireland, a region with the highest suicide rate in the U.K (Yeginsu), and one which has doubled since the region's militant groups struck the peace deal more than twenty years ago. The Good Friday Agreement finally put a stop to the three-decade conflict, but the 35-page long text failed to address peace and reconciliation and how to heal the wounds of the past. Northern Ireland is still a society in trauma and the scars of a divided people remain in the form of corrugated iron "peace lines", barbed wire fences and tribal murals (Geoghegan). For all their perceived differences, both communities seemed to have the same opinion on deviant gender or sexual behavior. The rigid belief system that persisted in the Catholic and Protestant communities regarding religion and national identity also ensured that they maintained similar opinions on homosexuality and transgenderism. As multiple studies show, people in Northern Ireland were homophobic during the Troubles (van Vliet). McKee wrote an open letter to herself about growing up gay in Belfast and her fraught journey to self-acceptance, which garnered viral attention in 2014, and was made into a short film. McKee's writing, whether on social justice or the legacy of the Troubles, is fearless in how it questions the status quo. It challenges conventional and accepted ways of thinking and bears testament to how the pen is mightier than the sword. She represents the vigor of a youth born from the Good Friday Agreement and a determination to work on the imperfect peace it made.

Derry Girls, while acknowledging the irrevocably traumatic time that was the Troubles, also reminds us that for many people these years were not just a national trauma, but someone's teenage years, not a political moment, but Clare's intensely personal coming-out scene ("Episode #1.6"). There is an extreme inhabiting of the girls' point of view: teenage antics, popularity contests, and discovering they do

not have trust funds. In this way *Derry Girls* is quite radical, not dwelling in the victimized woman narrative, but reclaiming their power and taking up space. When feminist scholars or writers such as McGee make women's stories visible, they help to expose the multiple ways in which notions of femininity and masculinity are sculpted by the intersections of "historical location, situation, culture, ethnicity, class, and in the particular case of Irish women, colonialism" (Earles 4). An overarching theme in Girl Culture according to Mitchell is Lost Girlhoods, a form of social forgetting or the practice of covering over the past, often through forgetting the pleasures of girl play. Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan reference the idea of girls losing themselves or their voice at adolescence and the importance of recovering voice (Mitchell xxix). This suggests that much of girls growing up amounts to survival and escape (Mitchell xxix) whereas in *Derry Girls,* they are thriving as teenagers, not merely surviving a political situation. By exploring historical and current documents through a feminist lens, we begin to ask questions that have been previously unanswered and which may help to serve those women who continue to fight injustices. Earles maintains that as war persisted in Northern Ireland, civil usefulness became defined as strength, public leadership, and willingness to face death for men, while femininity became identified with and constrained into terms of sacrifice, passivity, and dedication to family. Even as these ideals were disobeyed by women, the prevailing discourses certainly became more difficult to challenge and corrupt (Earles 12). A man was positioned as both the epitome of masculinity and the absolute within the army, whereas femininity became construed as a sign of weakness (Earles 12). In this way, theory and the sounding of women's voices become intimately joined in the creation of spaces within which women can heal and become empowered. Earles argues that dissent, in particular female dissent, "disrupts the discourses of patriarchy and colonialism which expect passive domesticity" (59). With the expression of social grief through theory and the voicing of women's words, the creation of feminist resistances whether mass-based or within everyday disturbances becomes inevitable. Past struggles and triumphs cannot be ignored. Monica Culbert explains, "We lost a lot, but we learned a lot. You can't let those years be lost. They have to count somewhere" (Earles 58). *Derry Girls* is a testament to this and represents a kind of resistance to the silencing of women's stories.

"Sláinte Motherfuckers": The Unruly Teenager

The female unruly teenager is often left out of literary and cultural representations of Northern Ireland. Because they are unruly, hormonal and morally transgressive, they have the power to unsettle traditional ideas around identity. *Derry Girls* is a joyful portrayal of the Northern Irish teenage woman, and one that is wholly realistic. During the Troubles, discourse surrounding issues about women were overwhelmingly dominated by religious and moral rhetoric (McCormick 5). Such a repressive moral code was consumed with protecting the purity and innocence of girls while hampering undesirable activities. It was of utmost importance that a teenage girl's modesty was protected in the conservative faith traditions of Northern Ireland. If immodest ideas were discussed, they had the power to unsettle traditional ideas around identity. As a result, teenage girls are often left out of literary and cultural representations of Northern Ireland. The issue is not that these narratives do not exist, but rather that the Irish literary canon fails to take account of them. Repression and the dogma of the Catholic religion permeated through much of pop culture and literature on the Troubles era, so much so that if young women were portrayed, it made sure to represent them as obedient "good girls".

Novels and films based on the Troubles often give prominence to male protagonists due to the drama of their potential involvement as paramilitary foot soldiers, and the possibility of their refusing to take part in the conflict. For example, the film *Good Vibrations* (2013) focuses on "teenage kicks" who are, almost exclusively, male. Novels such as Glenn Patterson's *The Rest Just Follows* and Tara West's *Fodder* seek to redress the gender imbalance of these portrayals of punk's adolescents, much in the same way that *Derry Girls* does. The show not only gives us access to the extraordinary lives of teenage women in Northern Ireland, but also offers a true depiction of how they had normal teenage years in many respects (e.g., chasing boys, getting detention, making hash scones), not a far cry from the school teenagers of today or yesterday, and that they too were be brash, bold, and vulgar. A true representation of female teenagers, it goes against ideological beliefs of how a woman or young girl should act and provides a frank and positive voice for these largely female issues and the everyday experiences of women in Ireland. In this respect, the show is a prime example of how pop culture allows for the reevaluation of the relationship between femininity and feminism, and how we define appropriate femininity.

Derry Girls oozes girl power and agency (Ryan 93), challenging the entrenched cultural ideals which surround appropriate femininity. Defined by the tension between being pretty and being funny, a sitcom such as this satirizes the culture's

ideals of "pretty" (Meeuf 45) embodying everything that pretty women should not be "loud, vulgar, assertive and unafraid to flout the culture's definition of womanhood" (Rowe 11). The figure of the unruly woman contains much potential for feminist appropriation, for "rethinking how women are constructed as gendered subjects in the language of spectacle and the visual" (11). Russo believes it is the parody of the unruly woman and the comedic conventions surrounding her which provide a space to act out the "dilemmas of femininity" (Russio qtd. in Rowe 225) and to make laughable these tropes of femininity. In season one, episode one, the girls had agreed to wear denim jackets instead of their school blazers ("Episode #1.1") to celebrate their individuality, but it is only young Clare Devlin who pulls through with it and delivers the classic line "Well I'm not being an individual on me own!" ("Episode #1.1" 00:04:06). Russo asks in what sense women can produce and make spectacles of themselves for themselves and use their visibility as power (Rowe 11). By utilizing their image as power in rebellious acts such as this, they might begin to negate their invisibility in the public sphere or the schoolyard, claim narrative space, and affect how they are seen by others.

Conclusion

Had *Derry Girls* come out during the times it was written about, the show would not have at all been received in the positive way it is now; it was not the right moment for a television show which brought humor into the equation and spoke to the ordinary moments in a teenager's life growing up in Northern Ireland. However now in a period of cultural unlock, it is wholly relevant and speaks to the human part of everyone that longs for a reason to laugh at something they could only approach with seriousness before. The sitcom's representation of women during the Troubles draws upon postfeminist discourse, and via Rosalind Gill's theoretical framework of postfeminism as a sensibility, shows up contradictory ideas of femininity and womanhood; not any distinct wave or backlash to other feminisms, simply emphasizing the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist notions. In this way, the sitcom is cathartic, reinserting the funny, loud woman back into the narrative and exposes the fact that there are a multitude of ways that a woman can be a woman or, that a girl can be feminine. Through investigating popular culture such as *Derry Girls* juxtaposed with (feminist) theory, dominant images, notions, and stereotypes can be exposed and challenged. *Derry Girls* is reflective of the postmodern woman that is not against feminism or ignorant to the great efforts of

other women that got us to this point but is also not afraid to be unapologetically and defiantly human.

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Reviews Introduction

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

Since taking over as editor of the reviews section of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* from my predecessor and occasional collaborator, Malynnda Johnson, I have tried to maintain the tradition of including reviews of books that demonstrate the breadth and depth of popular culture. I, myself, am a voracious consumer of different popular (and cult) texts and believe that a healthy media diet consists of equal amounts of "high" and "low" art (not that those binary distinctions mean anything anymore, or ever truly did). Cinema (specifically, old exploitation films produced during the 1960s and 1970s) remains my first love, but I am also a fan of games (both analog and digital), comic books (superhero and otherwise), professional wrestling, music, stand-up comedy, science fiction, collectibles, and more (not necessarily in that order). Furthermore, I am confident in saying that this idea applies to you as well, dear reader, because no one is a fan of just one thing. Rather, we are all fans of a multitude of media that ignite our passions, fuel our creativity, help us define our personalities, and provide us with topics to discuss and bond over either in person or online.

The reviews in this issue demonstrate just a small fraction of the range of popular culture, as they cover books devoted to just some of the topics mentioned above, as well as some that I did not even touch upon. First, Sarah Revilla-Sanchez considers Jonathan A. Allan's new monograph, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*, which analyzes the ideological impact of depictions of masculinity in romance novels (and in the 2001 film *Y tu mamá también*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón). Next, Navid Darvishzadeh brings us into the world of cinema with a review of Ulka Anjaria's *Understanding Bollywood: The Grammar of Hindi Cinema*, a book that serves as an introductory primer to one of the largest, most profitable filmmaking industries in the world today. Games and game studies are also represented in this issue, with Dennis Owen Frohlich reviewing Paul Booth's *Board Games as Media*, Ellen A. Ahlness discussing Edward Castronova's *Life Is a Game: What Game Design Says About the Human Condition*, and Jennifer Kelso Farrell providing an overview of Jon Peterson's *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity*. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, meanwhile, looks at Mark Duffett and Jon Hackett's *Scary Monsters: Monstrosity, Masculinity and*

Popular Music, a monograph that explores the intersections between masculinity and monstrosity in popular music. Argyrios Emmanouloudis steps inside the squared circle with Eero Laine's *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*, which considers professional wrestling's unique place within global popular culture. Following this, Melissa Beattie looks at *"Hailing Frequencies Open": Communication in* Star Trek: The Next Generation, in which author Thomas D. Parham III analyzes the first *Star Trek* sequel series through a communication studies lens. We close out this section with reviews of two recent films, as Carlos Tkacz considers the role of symbolism in *The Batman* while Elizabeth Shiller discusses how subjectivity drives the narrative of *The Last Duel*.

Before wrapping up this introduction to the reviews section, I want to take a moment to introduce and recognize my new assistant editor, Linda Howell of the University of North Florida, where she serves as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and the Director of both the writing program and the writing center. Linda's areas of interest include writing pedagogy, first-year writing, digital literacies, and fan and media studies. I think Linda is an excellent addition to the PCSJ team, and her keen eye and deep knowledge of writing helped ensure that the reviews published in this section are not only free from grammatical and mechanical errors but also help strengthen some ideas by suggesting ways the authors could expand on some of their thoughts.

As always, we hope that you find these reviews useful and that they point you toward texts that would help you in your research and teaching. I also want to encourage readers to submit their own reviews of scholarly books, novels, films, games, albums, comic books, or other popular culture texts. If you are interested in doing so, please visit our website for more information on submitting reviews. On behalf of Linda and myself, we thank you for taking the time to read these reviews and hope you find them enjoyable and/or beneficial.

Allan, Jonathan A. *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance.* Routledge, 2019.

Hegemonic masculinity has long been examined and contested across disciplines. *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* sets out to explore how men and masculinities appear in popular romance novels. In this monograph, Jonathan A. Allan engages in an interdisciplinary dialogue with popular romance scholars, such as Pamela Regis and Janice Radway, among others, as well as scholars of the critical study of men and masculinities (CSMM). In his introduction, Allan draws from Jeff Hearn's (2015) definition of CSMM that underlines the "socially constructed, produced, and reproduced" aspect of gender to examine men and masculinities as represented in female-authored popular romance, a genre which he posits is "clearly gendered" and "largely heteronormative," (2) although he also considers male/male popular romance novels. This book enables readers to think critically about men, masculinities, the male body, desire, and sexuality. Across seven chapters, Allan examines contemporary Harlequin novels and argues that normative, hegemonic masculinity is reinforced in these novels, while also allowing for more "hybrid masculinities."

In Chapter 1, Allan begins with the question of method in studying popular romance novels. He considers the challenge of sample size and wonders how much reading is enough, eventually contending against the idea that "size matters" (19). He draws on Northrop Frye's approach to genres to review men and masculinities in an archetypal fashion, which he is aware could be read in "generalizing tones" (22). In this chapter, Allan explains that he seeks patterns within the heroes in the novels, who undoubtedly embody what Radway (1991 [1984]) calls "spectacular masculinity." Allan convincingly delimits the scope of his book and explains his method to anticipate criticism.

In Chapter 2, Allan considers the desirability of hegemonic masculinity in a selection of short randomly chosen historical and contemporary romance novels. By conducting a textual analysis across novels, Allan argues that masculinity is central to the popular romance novels, and that it is hegemonic, heterosexual and "deeply committed to capitalist and bourgeois success" (39). Given the centrality of masculinity in popular romance novels, Allan rightly points to the underwhelming critical engagement between CSMM and romance. Thus, Allan sets the stage for further inquiries into hegemonic masculinity in the genre.

In Chapter 3, Allan examines the female orgasm. Through a close reading of select popular romance novels, he argues that female orgasm functions as a measure of the hero's masculinity, which hints toward the importance of action in reinforcing masculinity. This analysis leads to larger debates around inequality of orgasms and fake orgasms. In Chapter 4 Allan shifts his attention to the virgin hero – a seemingly opposed figure to the desirable and hegemonic male hero – to trace his complexity and capacity to challenge ideas of masculinities, much like "hybrid masculinities." Once again drawing on Frye, Allan examines "types" of male virgins and explores patterns and points of contact across novels. In his reading of popular romance, Allan notes that virginity does not undermine the hero's masculinity.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Allan explores why readers desire and consume male/male popular romance. Departing from popular romance novels, Chapter 5 offers a close reading of bromance in the Mexican film *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001). While this move might stand out to the reader, considering Allan's careful methodology and explanation of his sample selection, it is a fruitful one that expands his theorizing to other domains of cultural production. In this chapter, Allan notes that while male/male popular romance may challenge notions of hegemonic masculinity, the heroes in these novels are nonetheless complicit in its continuation. Thus, he argues that these male heroes can be read as examples of "hybrid masculinities." Allan continues this discussion in Chapter 6 and explores how the male body is consumed in male/male popular romance novels. Allan does not offer any definitive conclusions; however, these chapters invite further examination of masculinities and men's relationships in the popular romance novel, and fiction at large. In his seventh and final chapter, Allan addresses scholars of CSMM, as well as scholars of popular romance, and asks them to reconsider their critical engagement with pornography. In short, he suggests reading pornography romantically and reading romance pornographically.

Overall, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* is well-written and provocative. Allan poses insightful questions about masculinities, gender, sexuality, and desire. Perhaps one weakness is that each chapter seems to raise more questions than provide answers, yet this text encourages a rethinking of men and masculinities by bringing together two fields: critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM) and popular romance. Allan acknowledges the limitations of his work, especially concerning trans* romances and disability studies, but there is much to be said about race and masculinity too (which he briefly discusses in his

analysis of a Mexican film). This monograph will hopefully encourage the growth of interest in CSMM and popular romance. Allan's balance between his detailed methods, his interdisciplinary dialogue, and flexibility (from romance novels to slash fiction to film) broadens his audience. This text will be useful for undergraduate and graduate students taking courses in masculinities, gender, queer studies, sexuality, literature, and popular culture.

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Anjaria, Ulka. *Understanding Bollywood: The Grammar of Hindi Cinema*. Routledge, 2021.

As the book's subtitle reveals, *Understanding Bollywood: The Grammar of Hindi Cinema* offers an introduction to how Bollywood melodramas operate. The emphasis on what has persisted in Bollywood and shaped it from 1947 to the present – instead of discussing what has changed – is explored in three parts. The first part is divided into five chapters, each of which explores a major convention of Bollywood; moral structure, love, song and dance, visual style, and cinephilia. Part two attends to the topics of nationalism and gender/sexuality as the two principal subjects that have dominated Bollywood scholarship in recent decades. The last part consists of an epilogue, where the author discusses the new trends in Bollywood and hypothesizes its future.

The introduction to the book provides general information about Bollywood. Anjaria notes that Bollywood refers to the style of Mumbai-based popular films that employ the pan-Indian heterogenous language known as "Hindustani" (7). These "2.5-3.5 hours long" films (5) are marked by excess in almost every aspect primarily because they are not interested in the imitation of reality, but in "audience enjoyment" and "emotional involvement" (12). In Chapter 1, the author locates the cornerstone of Bollywood cinema in the "Manichean moral universe of good versus evil" (17). In this Manichean universe, the hero always prevails, and morality is always restored in the end. Anjaria notes that within the opening scenes of a Bollywood film the established conventions set the film's morality based on the hierarchical sensibilities of love, family, sibling bond, and the adoptive family. In

addition, they identify the hero or heroine by granting them extraordinary abilities to prevail over the villain who disrupts the moral universe.

Chapter 2 considers the centrality of romantic love as a generic feature of Bollywood cinema. The association of the moral universe with love leads to exalting the characters who believe in love and villainizing those who are skeptical or dismissive of it. On some levels, Bollywood presents love as "madness and at times destructive to both lover and beloved" (41), a motif rooted in Sufi tradition and Persian poetry such as the story of "Shirin and Farhad" and "Layla and Majnun" (36). Chapter 3 focuses on song-and-dance sequences as another fundamental feature of Bollywood. Anjaria studies song sequences for their significance in offering the possibility of a range of emotions, erotics, fantasy, heteronormative sexual desire, and prohibited and queer sexual desire through metaphor and allegory. The relatively autonomous circulation of song-and-dance numbers, where the songs are released prior to the film and create anticipation for it, is another characteristic of Bollywood that the author addresses in this chapter.

In Chapter 4, Anjaria studies the excessive visual style in Bollywood, where "more is generally better" (84). According to the author, the visual style also plays a role in the establishment of the moral universe through associating colorful and well-lit visuals with heroes. The importance of the love songs is reemphasized here via discussing their visually striking mise-en-scene and their "desolate locations" to convey the "fantastical and extra-social" conception of love (94). The author ends the first part by exploring cinephilia, stardom, fandom, double roles, twin plots, cameos, parodies, and intertextuality in Bollywood as crucial features that substantially contribute to the popularity of Hindi cinema.

Chapter 6 examines Bollywood's role in defining what "Indianness actually means" (141). Anjaria studies nationalism in Bollywood through the controversial role of the mother as India, the inherently corrupting attitude toward money (particularly in early Bollywood), incompetent and immoral state and police, and the secular nation, not as the separation of state from religion but as "the embrace of all religions" (151). The second part ends with the discussion of gender and sexuality in Bollywood. The author studies gender roles and homosociality in Bollywood both as the challenges to patriarchal traditions and the possibility of the non-normative spaces that "queer erotics can be represented without necessarily being named as queer" (172).

As Anjaria acknowledges, *Understanding Bollywood* is predominantly written to offer an introduction to Bollywood. To fulfill this promise, the book frequently

explains cultural aspects of Indian life and details historical facts about India and Indian cinema. Despite this assumption, the author takes the potential reader's rudimentary familiarity with India for granted on multiple occasions throughout the book. For instance, Anjaria uses the original title of the films because, as she argues, they seldom describe the theme of the films but work metonymically (128). The sheer number of the film titles discussed under their original designations nonetheless would overwhelm the reader who is not acquainted with Indian cinema, particularly considering the author's approach in examining the films without clearly explaining their story. However, Anjaria's repetitive discussion of the selection of the films through various lenses and the scattered "Case study" sections, where she explains the storyline of the films, aid the reader in overcoming the inundation of unfamiliar film titles and stories after committing to a few chapters.

The discussion of diegetic and extradiegetic features in Chapters 3 and 4 is bewildering. Anjaria equates "diegetic" to "intradiegetic" and defines it as an aspect of a film that "takes place in the narrative world of the film" (63). Accordingly, "extradiegetic" is defined as the cinematic elements that "do *not* take place in the narrative world of the text" (63, emphasis in original). These definitions become problematic when Anjaria implicitly conflates cinematic story with narrative and consequently constrains diegetic features to the story or plot of a film rather than its narrative. This slippage prompts her to categorize dream scenes (65) and flashbacks (63) as extradiegetic aspects of the film, though these cinematic features are often categorized as "intra-diegetic" (Hayward 85), or "diegetic" (Bordwell and Thompson) in film and media studies. This oxymoronic approach to diegetic and extradiegetic categorization is evident in her argument that a dream scene presented as a love song and dance scene "even though the song did not actually occur within the film's diegesis, the nature of the couple's relationship has 'really' changed" (65). Therefore, despite Anjaria's categorization of dream scenes as extradiegetic and based on her own claim that the song and dance scenes impact the characters, the narrative, and the story of the film, they should be classified as diegetic aspects of the film and not as extradiegetic elements.

Notwithstanding the minor issues, *Understanding Bollywood* provides fresh insight into Bollywood cinema. Anjaria seldom uses jargon and carefully elaborates on the Indian phrases and technical terms wherever they are utilized. The author also equips her discussion and analysis of the film with culturally specific details that are often needed for a more in-depth understanding of the popularity of

Bollywood. Moreover, by examining the popular Hindi cinema through an introductory perspective and an interdisciplinary lens, Anjaria creates a piece of scholarly work with accessible language that can be used as an introduction to Bollywood cinema not only in film study programs but also in cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology classes.

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While media scholars have increasingly studied video games over the last two decades, and rightfully so, the scholarly community has only given scant attention to board games, despite the similarities between the two media. Paul Booth seeks to correct this imbalance in *Board Games as Media,* arguing that the book "attempts to begin a conversation about how board games – just like media texts – create and complicate messages, and how we – as scholars, as readers, as players – can investigate these messages. What does it mean to read a board game, and how can we go about doing so?" (6) The book is based on extensive research into board games as texts, the community surrounding such games, and players and creators of board games. The questions Booth raises are appropriate, and his adaptation of tried-and-true media studies methodologies is carefully considered. "What has to change in our understanding of media when we move from screens to boards? How do the tactile and social natures of board games affect the deeper themes and meanings of them?" (7). *Board Games as Media* serves as an introduction into the nascent field of board game studies, as Booth showcases the multifaceted possibilities of studying board games.

In the first three chapters, Booth examines board games using a "ludo-textual" approach, which he conceives as a "way of analyzing the interaction between

players and material elements within board games" (10-11). In each chapter, he considers two to four games to examine ideological approaches to cooperative and competitive play styles (Chapter 1), the rhetoric of games (Chapter 2), and the interaction between a game's mechanisms (or actions a play can take within a game) and a game's theme (Chapter 3). In all three chapters, Booth compares complex board games, exploring their rules, mechanisms, themes, game components, and more. Anybody interested in textual analysis of video games, film, or other media texts should find the application of textual analysis to board games a novel and revealing form of study.

In Chapter 4, Booth focuses on game creators, and he outlines three approaches to board game authorship: the *créateur*, a board game designer with a consistent style and approach, which is analogous to the film auteur; the crafter, a designer who creates numerous games of varying styles and approaches; and the branded aestheticism of a board game company, whereby common themes and approaches span a company's catalog of games. The central question, what does it mean to be an "author" of a board game, is one without easy answers. Booth argues that for a board game to come alive, it needs to be played, and thus players themselves have an authorial role to play as well.

In Chapter 5, Booth turns his attention to the players of board games, investigating the gaming community through the lens of fandom studies. Booth argues that viewing board game players as "fans" opens new ways of understanding the relationship between players and media. Booth considers fans of board games that were adapted from video games, suggesting that fans should not be thought of as being confined to a particular medium, but rather that fandom can be an identity that supersedes any specific text.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Booth switches methodologies again, this time by approaching board game players with a traditional quantitative/qualitative survey. Chapter 6 details the results of the quantitative half, whereas Chapter 7 details the qualitative half. In the quantitative portion, Booth asks players how they play board games, what got them interested in board gaming, how often they play and purchase games, and so forth. This survey offers purely descriptive data, providing readers with some understanding of who constitutes the board gaming community. Chapter 7 is more interesting, as Booth reviews open-ended responses to reveal how players socialize through board games, what their ideal board gaming experience is, and what they think about the rise in popularity of board games. While these two chapters contain some intriguing observations about board gamers, they are also

the weakest chapters. Each chapter begins with a lengthy discussion of how quantitative and qualitative methodologies work, which will be familiar to anybody who has read an introductory methods textbook. Each chapter also contains numerous caveats about the limits of quantitative and qualitative research, so the result is a set of analyses that lacks confidence, compared to the first five chapters. On a technical note, the graphs, particularly in Chapter 6, came out very blurry, with chart labels that are almost impossible to read in some cases.

Chapter 8 focuses on issues of diversity in board games as texts and in the board gaming community at large. Issues of diversity and representation have long been concerns of the film, literature, music, and video games industries, so it makes perfect sense to discuss these issues in the context of board games. Booth interviews both players and board game designers to uncover their thoughts on diversity and to articulate the challenges the industry faces (where creators and players alike are often older, white males). The possible solutions offered to make this hobby more inclusive are insightful and necessary.

The final chapter is an autoethnography of Booth and his time playing an especially complicated board game, *Gloomhaven.* Booth focuses on issues of diversity, questioning his own cultural standpoint and how it influences his experience with the game. This is another chapter where Booth seems a bit unsure of his methodology, as he includes several caveats about what autoethnography can and cannot do, which limits the impact. The book ends with a short conclusion that brings up ecological issues with the physical production of board games (e.g., waste of paper, plastic, etc.). While this idea is not fully developed, it offers yet another topic of scholarly exploration.

Overall, *Board Games as Media* is a thorough introduction to the academic study of board games, and the book showcases numerous methodological approaches to this topic. This book will appeal not only to scholars interested in board games themselves, but also scholars of adjacent fields of study, such as video games, fandom studies, and textual criticism.

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Castronova, Edward. *Life Is a Game: What Game Design Says About the Human Condition.* Bloomsbury, 2021.

Life is like a game. Many philosophers have offered this metaphor over the centuries, yet Edward Castronova makes an adjustment to this mode of thought in his book *Life Is a Game: What Game Design Says about the Human Condition.* Rather than proposing an allegory in this twenty-years-in-the-making book, he asserts that the title is not metaphor. For Castronova, life *is* a game. In the introduction, he explains this direct comparison is based on the basic principles of game design, which inherently involves creating limits, incentives, rewards, and risks – a setup that is exactly like life, its consequences, and some inherent, underlying drive to win (whatever that may mean). This setup hints at what makes the book so compelling: it centers, inherently, on exerting agency.

Life Is a Game goes beyond the new field of game design – beyond game theory and beyond the neurobiology of games (how they make us feel, and how our brains respond to risk and reward). Instead, the book centers on the human condition as it is reflected in game thinking. At the core of game thinking is the strategic layer, where Castronova says we take our values, transform them, and implement them into norms and behavior. In other words, these are the general principles by which we live life, rather than the specific decisions we make to remain in accordance with these principles. Castronova divides his analysis into two parts: Part One details "life as a strategy" while Part Two catalogs the stances one may take in playing the game of life.

Part One is dedicated to examining the "black box" of existence: determining that, if life is a game, what are the packaging, pieces, and rules to this game? There are no easy answers to this question; therefore, Castronova draws heavily from philosophy to discuss the interactive nature of existence, leaning toward Viktor Frankl and Kierkegaard's will to meaning instead of the will to power or pleasure found in Nietzsche or Freud. From this philosophical foundation he transitions into a conversation about what can constitute "successful" play in the game of life (which is explored at the deepest level in Chapter 4). This conversation then transitions into a general discussion on the strategic layer an individual may play based on how they approach the game of life. In discussing how people choose their stances, Castronova says that while everyone has a stance, some people have thoughtful, coherent stances while others have unconscious or incoherent stances.

Part Two explores how people define "success" in life, with Chapters 6 through 10 exploring five main stances people may adopt as they define success: hedonistic, excellence, heroic, orthodox, and mystic stances. Castronova defines each stance's philosophical commitment and implications and evaluates each stance by its ability to facilitate inner peace or general happiness (whatever that means according to the stance). The book regularly draws from philosophical and religious texts to articulate these stances.

What really makes *Life Is a Game* stand out from other contemporary books on game design is how it draws from recent intellectual inquiry on games and connects to much older (ancient) conversations about reality and understanding. While previous literature compared life to a game, it neglected to dive as deeply into a clear definition about the philosophy and structure of games themselves. The scope of the book also differentiates it from other literature. The author seeks to bring a level of excitement alongside wisdom while also producing scholarship that investigates the states of life and living.

If we imagine life is a game, Castronova asserts, we solve the problem of "boredom" in life. This framing does run the risk of appearing to trivialize the challenges of those in less-developed countries (as well as the historically marginalized peoples in more developed countries), but it does confront the existential ennui that comes with a lack of stimulation or challenge. Castronova considers the diminishing benefits effect in the human condition (as life becomes better for swathes of the human population, the gains are increasingly diminished), yet readers are left wondering about the challenges looming ahead of us: climate change and its political, sociocultural, and conflict consequences. If humanity's most concerning problem is boredom, are forthcoming "nature-driven quests" something that bring purpose?

While it may be simple, one of the main philosophical takeaways of the book is that mystery is fun. Mystery brings meaning. For the game perspective, uncertainty at every scale and in every dimension brings excitement. The comparison to life as an RPG game (42-6) is amusing and thought-provoking, particularly the comparison between dynamic difficulty adjustment and education, job tenure, and relationship building. There could be some very engaging conversation further in this topic about agency, imposed limits, and growth caps as they relate to career or interest specialization.

Philosophically or theologically minded readers will find themselves repeatedly considering their own convictions and values. At no point in the book do readers

feel as if life is being trivialized by being referred to as a game. Instead, readers get the sense that Castronova carefully and thoughtfully created this framework.

Castronova notes at the beginning of the book that he will refrain from making any comments about a possible "dungeon master" (i.e., God) until the end of the book, where rather than a conclusion, he offers a two-page epilogue positing a brief philosophical outline to the idea of a "game designer." This structuring is intentional and thoughtful, as it does not influence readers as to the author's own beliefs and positionality. (I will not spoil the author's own thoughts about a grand game designer here, in the event readers wish to read through the book without having their own reception of the text colored.) Readers familiar with researcher positionality in design choices will appreciate the placement of the author's own personal beliefs. Like a well-crafted research memo or personal statement, it sits comfortably in the end of the article to minimize reader contemplation of the text. Overall, *Life Is a Game* is inherently interdisciplinary, bringing together content from across academic fields, and appealing to any scholarly and lay readers with interests in politics, philosophy, economics, sociology, and of course, game design.

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Duffett, Mark and Jon Hackett. *Scary Monsters: Monstrosity, Masculinity and Popular Music*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

Music is full of monsters, and humanity is better for it.

With *Scary Monsters: Monstrosity, Masculinity and Popular Music*, Mark Duffett and Jon Hackett have compiled a fascinating collection of analyses that provide new perspectives on popular music figures, popular culture, and the societies and cultures of both the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st. Thanks to their innovative utilization of different theories regarding concepts such as masculinity and monstrosity, their collection is of interest to a wide range of scholars. Indeed, their interdisciplinary approach to applying theories provides an example of how such transdisciplinary scholarship and research can be accomplished.

Scary Monsters presents analyses of various fictional and nonfictional musicians and musical figures. Through their close readings of popular culture figures, texts, and discourses, they demonstrate an adeptness at incorporating the less commonly applied monstrosity studies with the more prevalent gender studies to provide new insights into music studies. The introduction alone, with its reviews of these three fields, is well worth reading for anyone interested in this specific topic or even how to engage in such scholarship.

The remaining chapters each focus on a specific case study, with either Duffett or Hackett serving as the lead author. Each chapter explores a musical performer or fictional character that are themselves texts co-constructed by and situated within various fictional, popular, and public discourses; the authors examine these representations to illuminate how monstrosity provides a unique perspective on changing sociocultural notions of gender and identity. Despite presenting each chapter as a piece of solo authorship, they still cohere both in writing style and discussion. In each chapter the authors ground their analysis of their chosen case study in relevant literature, and the writing is approachable for any emerging or established scholar. Indeed, fans of these popular culture texts and performers may find the writing clear enough to understand without substantial academic training, as the authors explain key concepts and theories (although said fan may want to have a dictionary on hand to help remind them).

The real strength of these case studies is the method in which the authors situate the example within a larger context to understand the nuances and complexities of that case study. Each example seeks to understand how the concept of the "monster" allows musicians and musical figures to negotiate gender norms, stereotypes, and roles. Indeed, the book's title draws on David Bowie's fourteenth album, *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, originally released in 1980. In an interview from 2003, Bowie described the album as a "kind of purge [...] I felt I was on the cusp of something absolutely new. There were no absolutes. Nothing was necessarily true, but everything was true" (DeMain). While Bowie was discussing his own struggles with addiction and familial life, this reflection also aligns with the work Duffett and Hackett have done with their case studies. By employing monstrosity as a concept adopted by queer studies to deconstruct gender representation, the authors also demonstrate the playfulness in musical texts as to whether gender is truly a binary absolute of black and white, male and female, man and woman. Or, rather, as their analyses contend, is gender more fluid, more complex, and more playful?

For example, in Chapter 4, "The platformed Prometheus: Frankenstein and glam rock," Hackett weaves together the figures, texts, and discourses of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with the glam rock of the 1970s and the cult classic stage play *The Rocky Horror Show* Looking across nearly two centuries of popular culture, and popular music in particular, Hackett applies the metaphorical nature of Frankenstein's monster in glam rock, which has a magical quality similar to the alchemy responsible for the monster's construction. Indeed, Hackett presents the argument that the bricolage of Frankenstein's monster is akin to the styles, both in terms of music and fashion, that serve as the genre conventions for glam rock. This theoretical lens is then used to read and understand different presentations of the Frankenstein metaphor in glam rock texts, such as *The Rocky Horror Show* and Parliament Funkadelic. The result is a discussion of hybridized identities, including gender identities, that have influenced popular music and culture even after glam rock faded away.

I approached this book not as a music scholar but as a fan of many of the texts discussed. Even without being a music scholar, I found the analytical approach compelling due to how it provided new insights into texts I both knew and found myself realizing I did not know well enough. For example, in Chapter 3, "Colonel Parker and the art of commercial exploitation: The manager as monster," I had periphery knowledge of Colonel Tom Parker, but this chapter presented the man, and perhaps the myth, in a way that provided new insights into Parker, Elvis Presley, and their relationship. Duffett presents evidence for how public discourse and popular culture have repeatedly portrayed Parker in ghoulish manners, especially after Presley's death when people needed to make sense of how he could die so young and so unexpectedly. Positioning Parker as both the villain and the monster in this story helped Presley's fans maintain the myth and the image of Elvis they preferred. Duffett's work here will be interesting to compare to the upcoming Baz Luhrmann film *Elvis* in which Tom Hanks plays Parker; an analysis, I hope, someone completes using this chapter as a starting point.

One critique of the book itself stems from the lack of a conclusion chapter. Given that each author is credited as having written separate chapters, including a conclusion chapter written by both would indicate a place in which they engaged each other and their cases studies more dialogically. Such a chapter would have allowed for a summary of what was learned from the connections between the case studies while also suggesting further research that could be done on this topic and by using these different disciplines. This type of conclusion would also provide the

space to strengthen the insights on masculinity in popular music and culture gained from the application of monstrosity. Noting these specific insights would also allow for a discussion of other analytical spaces and case studies.

Overall, the book suggests a new approach to music studies, one that will hopefully be taken up and applied by others. Studying musicians such as BabyMetal and Lady Gaga, for example, from the intersection of femininity and monstrosity could be very insightful comparisons to the masculine figures discussed in this book. Similarly, exploring the zombie musical *Anna and the Apocalypse* (John McPhail, 2017)*,* with its Disney musical meets zombie horror genre mixing, could be an interesting analysis commenting on the *High School Musical* franchise. Indeed, this book has, in some ways, accomplished what Bowie sang in "Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)": "She opened strange doors; that we'd never close again." Providing a theoretical grounding for new directions in scholarship is indeed opening "strange doors" that the rest of us can now walk through.

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Laine, Eero. *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*. Routledge, 2020.

For a long time, critics and scholars have debated whether professional wrestling can be classified as theatre, sports, or something else entirely. Eero Laine's book *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* acknowledges professional wrestling's peculiarity and examines its position in a stage of commercial interest. I observe that the book's title has a double meaning, as Laine not only examines

professional wrestling in relation to commercial theatre (the "stage") but also considers it as a part of a global "stage" of transactions and monetization.

The book is broken into five main chapters, each analyzing the relationship of theatre and professional wrestling under a different topic. Laine starts with his claim that professional wrestling is undeniably a form of theatre and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is a transnational theatre company (2-4). He then briefly traces professional wrestling's history and highlighting its carnival roots (18), but, more importantly, he acknowledges a major opposition between theatre and professional wrestling: in professional wrestling, the performers purposely enforce the idea that what they do is real (18-9). This idea is supported by a very interesting point that appears early in the book, when Laine refers to Michael Shayne Boyle's work of examining theatre through a Marxist lens and attempts to do the same for professional wrestling, as he considers both as forms of labor that lead to intangible productivity (22). From the start, the book delves into the issues that arise from the intersection of labor and spectacle in the world of pro wrestling. Also, Laine remembers to address the issues raised by so-called "hardcore" wrestling, remarking that labor is present even in the most (seemingly) barbaric aspects of professional wrestling.

Laine explains that professional wrestling characters are unable to rid themselves of their past, as previous behaviors are carried throughout their legacy (39). While exploring these behaviors, he locates some particularly negative ones, such as sexism and hyper-masculinity, and he argues that professional wrestling can do better. He then compares two theater plays, *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* and *Trafford Tanzi*, both featuring professional wrestling elements, to further elucidate the connection of theatre and professional wrestling and to emphasize professional wrestling's potential for social critique. In addition, the book makes some solid points on how the fabrication of kayfabe (maintaining the illusion that professional wrestling is real) has permeated various aspects of profit-making in contemporary society (32).

Apart from similarities between commercial theatre and professional wrestling, Laine also delves into a major difference, that of branding likeness. According to Laine, a theatrical character can be portrayed by numerous actors, whereas in professional wrestling a character is usually (though not always) tied to one specific performer (81-82). Then, big corporations (in this case, WWE) find ways to commercialize and profit from that likeness in a continuous manner, even when

said likeness shifts (94), producing a theatrical performance that also dictates the company's stock market value (117).

For Laine, professional wrestling and capitalism go hand in hand, but wrestling itself allows for cultivating a resistant mentality (107-108). Laine mainly examines WWE under that lens. One could say that by reducing professional wrestling in the biggest part of the book to simply WWE, an analysis might be limited. Yet WWE is undoubtedly the biggest wrestling company in the world and for some people a synonym for professional wrestling, which makes the author's choice understandable. Regardless, I believe that similar examinations can bring forth interesting results for other big internationally touring companies, such as New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW) or All Elite Wrestling (AEW). Also, I would have liked to see more about contemporary social media and breaking (or maintaining) of kayfabe in a global commercial stage that is the internet. Furthermore, Laine quotes Sharon Mazer, who writes that wrestling promoters provide hyper-masculine content to satisfy one specific (e.g., young male) audience (39) and goes on to expand its position on the commercial stage. Yet, at the same time, promotions such as SHIMMER in the U.S. and Stardom in Japan also champion women's professional wrestling and thus cater to a largely female audience, thereby offering alternative readings to how professional wrestling is understood by somewhat disrupting prevailing hypermasculine attitudes. I realize that, as an introductory book published in the Western world, the text would focus on a specific market, but for a more complete overview, even brief mentions of those alternative products could have supported the analysis.

Apart from positioning professional wrestling to the field of Theatre and Performance Studies and highlighting its commercial practices as a spectacle, the book provides an excellent opportunity to consider professional wrestling as a product of society that can also provide a multi-sided form of criticism (something that theatre also does). It can furthermore satisfy a reader interested in historic aspects of professional wrestling, as Laine devotes a big part of one chapter exploring aspects of professional wrestling's past, always in comparison to theatre and its commercial side. Given its awareness of its position within Theatre and Performance Studies research but also Professional Wrestling Studies, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* is certainly a nice piece that scholars should "grapple with." Regardless of their background, readers will certainly take something away from it.

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Parham III, Thomas D. *"Hailing Frequencies Open": Communication in* Star Trek: The Next Generation. McFarland, 2019.

All iterations of *Star Trek* use a "universal translator" to communicate or attempt to communicate with most alien races. Yet the various types of communication that are ever-present within the different series have not been explicitly studied to any great degree. Thomas D. Parham III's book *"Hailing Frequencies Open"* attempts to redress that omission with mixed results.

After a brief introductory chapter that describes *Star Trek* for anyone unfamiliar with the multiple series, Parham spends three chapters looking at different aspects of specific communication theory (as opposed to media and communication[s]) and how they apply primarily to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (henceforth TNG). Chapter 2 focuses on intrapersonal communication, defined as the characters' "inner journey" (44), and unfortunately tends to include a bit too much opinion (e.g., "postulat[ing]" that Geordi LaForge is the "least realized" of the main characters [62]). Here, Parham uses different character vignettes to illustrate aspects of their personal growth throughout the series. The section on Data and symbolic interactionism is well developed, though the section on gender seems to endorse the fallacy of the gender binary. While one can argue that this situation occurs because the regular characters also fell into this binary, it is worth noting that episodes of TNG (and subsequent series) brought in concepts of genderfluidity as well as agender and third-gender individuals. While these individuals are briefly discussed within the context of relationships in the next chapter, discussing them here would have made for a more in-depth discussion of gender rather than simply focusing on the characters of Troi and Worf. Parham also seems to believe that

gender is not a discursive construct, putting him out of step with contemporary cultural and gender studies, which is unfortunate.

Chapter 3 moves on to discuss interpersonal communication, something TNG was known for in contrast to its more action-orientated parent series. Throughout this chapter, Parham focuses on various dyadic relationships in the series, though he seems to rely on non-academic interviews with members of the production team as evidence rather than academic work. While it is certainly valid to engage with members of production teams (and doing so can give great benefit to academic work, as in Pearson and Messenger-Davies' work on TNG), doing so uncritically as is done here is not ideal. Work on *Star Trek* by a variety of scholars could and should have been used to strengthen the arguments if Parham felt that the more general texts on interpersonal communication were insufficient.

Chapter 4 deals with the inextricably bound topics of group and organizational communication. This chapter focuses on leadership styles, primarily juxtaposing the styles of Kirk and Picard, though I find the subheading "the Real Differences" (88) to be somewhat disingenuous as well as falling outside the parameters of the book based upon the title. While the concept of this chapter is not necessarily problematic in and of itself it tends to exemplify one of the main problems in this work: its overreliance on uncritical interviews with the production team rather than interviews that are analysed critically.

The next two chapters are where the book's most serious problems lie. The mass communication chapters have a fatal flaw that results from how Parham conducts audience research. Qualitative research using open-ended questions (often in a semi-structured format) yields far deeper data than surveys with closed questions. Specifically, Parham's use of a Likert scale with statements rather than questions strongly limits the information that can be reliably gleaned; not only does the definition of "strongly agree/disagree" vary from person to person, but such a structure limits the number of potential answers (and, as such, data) and does not allow respondents to explain why they agree/disagree with a particular statement. The demographic "questions" are also flawed as they fall into the fallacy of the gender binary and fail to give space for respondents to fully self-identify. As a specialist in audience research, I unfortunately find this whole section to be of extremely limited use.

The final chapter is almost best described as "miscellaneous," with topics moving across several other series in the *Star Trek* universe. The chapter itself, when playing to the author's clear strengths in communication theory, is fine and

while the fact that it moves across multiple series is not necessarily a problem, given that the book positions itself in its title as being about TNG, it might have been better served to retitle the book to encompass multiple *Trek* series, and discussing the various issues brought up, e.g., discussing organizational dissent in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* as part of the original chapter on organizational communications. Indeed, a restructuring of the book to be solely focused on intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and organizational communications would have improved the text immensely. Just because *Star Trek* has been primarily a television text does not mean that a chapter needs to be devoted to it; the relevant parts of TV theory could have been used to contextualise the series in the introductory chapter.

All that said, Chapters 2 through 4 would be well-suited to an undergraduate introductory course on communication provided the problems discussed here were addressed in the class. The book covers most of the theoretical topics that are used in such courses and is written at a level that undergraduates with little to no prior knowledge of the topic can understand. The students would need to be cautioned about the problematic survey as well, but even that could be used as a teachable moment in which the students are encouraged to design a stronger audience research project on the topic. Overall, it is perhaps best to call this book a reasonable first attempt at understanding the various communication theory/ies illustrated in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, with the hope that future studies will only improve such important work.

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Peterson, Jon. *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity*. MIT Press, 2020.

In his book *The Elusive Shift*, author Jon Peterson writes, "Every *Dungeons & Dragons* character begins with throwing dice for abilities such as Intelligence or Wisdom, but it is up to the player to formulate statements of intention for that character, to decide what the character says and does, and through that process potentially to turn those characteristics into some semblance of a person" (71). Most of *The Elusive Shift* focuses on the role of the referee or dungeon master (DM) and how much control they should have on games designated as Role-Playing Games

(RPGs). The roots of RPGs are found in wargaming but one of the biggest differences is that the wargames genre and its various offshoots tend to be highly scripted with players taking control of already established characters in a pre-existing narrative. RPGs sought to open gaming up. *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) was revolutionary in tabletop gaming because it asked DMs to create an entirely new world with elaborate dungeons full of monsters to battle, develop a campaign story, utilize a system to award XP or gold, and determine how the game should progress, and it asked all of that with very few hard and fast rules which led to a Wild West of gaming.

Peterson lays out his book as loosely chronological: Chapter 1 covers the origins of RPGs in the cultures of wargaming and science fiction fan communities. Chapter 2 discusses the core of D&D which leads into Chapter 3's focus on character alignments. Chapter 4 dives into the role of the DM in RPGs. Between Chapters 4 and 5 there is an interlude that attempts to address how all the discussion transcends game design. Chapter 5 examines theoretical essays that attempt to define and situate RPGs in a concrete way in the tabletop gaming landscape. The book concludes with Chapter 6, which considers how the genre has matured since its inception in the 1970s.

The book concentrates on the mid- to late-1970s era of tabletop gaming but makes a few forays into the past and even touches on the popular text-based computer games of the 1980s such as *Zork* and *Adventures*. Many famous names are invoked throughout including Gary Gygax, Steve Jackson, Glenn Blaclow, and Lewis Pulsipher. The heart of the debate involves the role of the referee and how to accommodate several different common RPG playing styles (role-playing, wargaming, ego-tripping, storytelling). Role-playing entails players inhabiting their characters and is less concerned with gold or XP. Wargaming is the opposite of role-playing because it is about the players knowing the game's system. Ego-tripping is when players are only concerned with XP and power for their character. Lastly is storytelling, which is closer to acting out a fantasy novel than playing a game.

Peterson notes that RPGs were alternately referenced as Fantasy Role-Playing (FRP) and adventure games, highlighting how game adopters approached their characters and what types of bonds were formed between players and characters. Some players opted to create rich characters while others wanted to just gain experience points (XP) and power through a game. Would the DM allow players to roll the dice for their own abilities or would the referee do it for the players? Some

DMs permitted players to roll for 12 characters and chose the best. Other DMs went further with a point system which allowed players to "buy" points to level up. This all led to the character alignments most players are familiar with, even if only in meme form, and created more rules and work for the DM. How closely would the DM monitor character actions to make sure those actions are in the character's alignment? Would there be punishments for someone who went against their alignment? D&D took the wargaming alignments Law, Neutral, and Chaos and further refined them into what we know as Good, Neutral, and Evil on one axis and Lawful, Neutral, and Chaotic on another axis allowing for permutations such as Lawful Neutral and Chaotic Good. As Peterson observes, some referred to this as an ethical calculus that allows for personal goals within a game as well as the campaign's goals.

Along with focusing on the debate of what is and what is not an RPG and where it fits into the larger gaming landscape, Peterson touches on issues in the fandom. One issue is the lack of representation for women in the early gaming communities. Peterson does a good job of incorporating women's voices such as Jean Wells and Kathleen Pettigrew into the work. A second issue that Peterson attends to is ageism as older veteran gamers tried to close ranks against the rising tide of younger second-generation D&D players in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some as young as 14 years old. The younger players often had not played an RPG without using an instruction guide and so, for them, the rules were more finite. Older gamers did not like that. Somewhat disappointingly, Peterson elides a lot of the controversies of D&D and only obliquely references James Dallas Egbert, the Michigan State student who went missing in 1979. His disappearance was linked erroneously with D&D sparking a mild hysteria in the media. Peterson references Egbert and makes a point of separating his disappearance from the gaming community, but this brief mention is a bit unsatisfying.

From its roots in wargames and miniature tabletop games D&D has long been a genre-defying and defining game. By the end of the book Peterson concedes that there still is not an adequate definition of the phrase "role-playing game" that can succinctly characterize and simultaneously encapsulate the variety and richness of the genre. As part of the exploration of RPGs the book also examines the fan communities in the 1970s which were originally centered on science fiction/fantasy literature and the wargames that helped refine the genre's rules. Finally, the book concentrates on the different tensions between fans, players, creators, referees, and

the RPG game market itself, making it ideal for use in classes studying everything from fandom to games to the political economic structures of media.

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The Batman. Dir. Matt Reeves. Screenplay by Matt Reeves and Peter Craig. Perf. Robert Pattinson, Zoe Kravitz, Colin Farrell, and Paul Dano. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2022.

To anyone who pays attention to the movies, reboots and sequels are nothing new. Yet it feels like the percentage of new films that are remakes/sequels/reboots is currently at an all-time high. *The Batman* (2022)*,* directed by Matt Reeves and starring Robert Pattinson, falls right into this trend. Thus far, there have been eight films based on *Batman* in three distinct timelines, not including some old film serials and the crossovers like *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016), which introduced Ben Affleck as Bruce Wayne. It should also be said that, for comic books, this trend is nothing new; retelling and updating origin stories and characters with new artists and writers has deep roots in comic book culture, making superheroes a kind of apotheosis of both the narrative as structure and the character as archetype. This tendency toward reinvention of course leads us to the question: what new take on the title character could *The Batman* possibly offer? Quite a bit, apparently.

This rendition of the character created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger for DC Comics in 1939 is not quite a new origin story; rather, we enter the story in year two of Batman's existence. The film follows Batman (Robert Pattinson) as he, with the help of Commissioner Gordon (Jeffrey Wright), investigates a series of murders claimed by the Riddler (Paul Dano), an enigmatic figure prone to leaving clues for our hero to follow. In typical style, the Riddler is always one step ahead and leads the Batman to revelations about the interconnected relationship between organized crime in Gotham and the city's ruling class, including some that touch Wayne personally. Along the way, Batman meets and is helped by Selina Kyle (Zoë Kravitz), who is searching for answers about the murder of her friend. Batman fights his way through the levels of corruption until he, and the audience, become privy to the Riddler's overall, terrible plan.

Screenwriters Matt Reeves and Peter Craig take for granted that the audience already knows the traditional beginnings of Bruce Wayne's transformation into the superhero without powers; mentions are made of the death of his parents and lip-service is paid to the fact that Wayne's bat-inspired vigilantism is a continuation of his father's projects to reform a crime-ridden Gotham City, but those events are left mostly off-screen. As such, this version differentiates itself from the Christopher

Nolan trilogy in which *Batman Begins* (2005) details the story of what might be called Wayne's radicalization. This new portrayal leads to another interesting difference: in previous iterations of the character played by Michael Keaton, Val Kilmer, George Clooney, and Christian Bale, all navigated their identities with some ease, embodying the darkness of Batman and the flippancy of the playboy billionaire with almost no overlap. In *The Batman*, however, Robert Pattinson's Bruce Wayne is a traumatized, damaged human who cannot simply turn the bat off when he removes his costume and dons his tailored suit. The loss of his parents is very real to this Wayne, and his trauma is not a thing of the past but a fact of his life. This, then, is what drives Pattinson's Wayne: pain and loss and fear. In this light, Batman fully realizes the radicalized reality that would be necessary for such a character to spend his nights beating thugs bloody.

The first two WB Batman films, produced between 1989 and 1992, were considered much darker than the Adam West series from the 60s and were frequently compared to Frank Miller's vision of Batman in his graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*. The next two films returned to something closer to the older slapstick style, tinting the violence through bright colors (Robin's suit and The Riddler's bright green leotard being good examples) and gimmicky set pieces (who can forget the infamous bat-card?). The *Dark Knight* Trilogy from Nolan brought back a more serious portrayal of violence and its effects on the body, but this was filtered through Hollywood-chic martial arts stylization that invariably cleans up the fighting into a choreographed dance. *The Batman* continues this trend towards ever grittier portrayals of violence and drops all pretenses. Between Dano's serial-killer portrayal of the Riddler and Batman breaking bones, using weapons like baseball bats, and taking shotgun blasts to the chest at close range, this film assaults the viewer with a kind of violence that cannot be ignored nor downplayed as comical. Instead, the violence Pattinson's Batman inflicts on the criminal underworld of Gotham, which includes Colin Farrell's Penguin and John Turturro's Carmine Falcone, is clearly a product of the trauma Wayne has yet to fully understand and cope with. This ferocity points back to the edge on which this Batman walks between the hero and the villain and gives us one of the most powerful moments in the film when his tagline, "I am vengeance," is appropriated by one of the Riddler's henchman. While this dichotomy has in some ways always been a part of the character, traditionally the Batman has approached the line rather than fully straddled it as he appears to be here. The trauma Wayne lives with, that he tries to funnel into making the city a safer place, makes it difficult for him to

exercise the restraint we expect of our heroes, and Pattinson embodies that dark side of superhero vigilantism with an engaging and emotional performance.

This sense of moral darkness is reflected in the overall aesthetic of the film. Where in previous versions Bruce Wayne's scenes often offered a reprieve from Batman's melancholy, *The Batman* allows viewers no such light. The film is dark. Here, Gotham City is the noir, urban landscape turned up to eleven. If the shadows are Batman's domain, then, in this film, shadows and darkness are a major part of the viewer's experience. Yet there is a kind of beauty to the film, a dream-like quality that puts the audience directly inside Batman's mind and gives them access to his vision of the world. Through this juxtaposition of the beauty of the cinematography and the grittiness of the characters and action, the audience is shown a world in which symbol is everything. We see, in a way not previously explored, that Wayne, for whom the symbol of the bat is a tool by which he forces meaning into a meaningless world, is drowning in the symbols he sees. He is in some ways trapped by them and the power they hold over his life. Signifier and signified collapse in the character of Wayne, who cannot detangle his sense of self from the trauma that drives him into costume. As such, Batman, rather than being an alter ego or even his true self, is instead the embodied reality of the trauma, the signifier brought to independent life in and of itself. For scholars and teachers that look at or use popular culture, this rendition of the Batman offers fruitful ground for the exploration of the ways in which signs and the world they are meant to represent often bleed into one another in ways that are difficult to deconstruct. Be it the concepts of justice or vengeance, the memories of his parents, or the costume he uses to protect himself from a world he does not understand, Wayne's world is one of layers and layers of meaning and a beautiful one at that.

Is the film perfect? No. There are some underdeveloped ideas and threads that get lost in this three-hour attempt to do so much with this character that audiences have seen so many times. Additionally, while Dano, Kravitz, and Wright all give powerful performances that update their characters to the times – Dano's portrayal of the Riddler as an online extremist is especially interesting – there are times they are not given quite enough time to fully shine through in the film. Kravitz's Catwoman especially begs more development and screentime as does the character's relationship to power and the elite. Yet this film does something that is perhaps becoming rarer and that I am coming to appreciate more: it takes *risks.* Where the film could have followed established formulas, this iteration instead opts to offer something new, and it is mostly successful, achieving something like the

sublime in a way that feels uncommon for a superhero movie. This alone is worth the runtime and makes *The Batman* a must-watch for fans of both the character and cinema itself.

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The Last Duel. Dir. Ridley Scott. Screenplay by Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Nicole Holofcener. Perf. Jodie Comer, Matt Damon, Adam Driver, and Ben Affleck. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2021.

Adapted by Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Nicole Holofcener from Eric Jager's 2004 book, *The Last Duel: A True Story of Trial By Combat in Medieval France*, director Ridley Scott's *The Last Duel* recounts the story of the rape of Marguerite de Carrouges (Jodie Comer) in 1386. On the surface, this based-on-true-events film is a medieval "he said, she said" account of what really happened, but it is much more layered than that. Much like *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950), *The Last Duel* unfolds in three parts, each telling the same story but from a different perspective.

   "The Truth according to Jean de Carrouges" details the account of Marguerite's husband Jean (Matt Damon), who sees his former friend, Jacques Le Gris (Adam Driver), as an evil man who has stolen everything from him, even his wife. He swears vengeance on Le Gris and uses his wife to enact his retribution. "The Truth according to Jacques Le Gris" is Le Gris's account of what happened between him and Marguerite. Le Gris pities Carrouges as a simpleton but comes to admire Marguerite. Le Gris does not believe he raped Marguerite because she seemed to reciprocate his advances. To him, her cries were playful, much like the other women he has slept with. "The Truth according to Marguerite" is Marguerite's account of what happened. The audience is meant to believe that her account is true because "The Truth" in this chapter's title lingers (Mears, 2021). Marguerite retells events of the assault and finishes the film with how events played out, leading to the last duel between Carrouges and Le Gris.

The irony, however, lies in the quote "there is no right; there is only the power of men." Despite this being a story of what happened to Marguerite, she is overshadowed by men and religion. This move even manifests in the framing of the film: while she waits her turn for Carrouges and Le Gris to finish their side of the story, Marguerite's account is interrupted when Carrouges challenges Le Gris to a duel. The court, who heavily rely on God's ruling, is about to dismiss the case due to the friendship between Le Gris and the priest Pierre d'Alençone (Ben Affleck), when Carrouges, blinded by rage and looking to save face, challenges Le Gris to a duel without thinking about what this action could do to Marguerite. A trial by combat is considered a fair verdict because God will protect the honest man against the dishonest one. Should Carrouges die in the duel, he will be seen as a hero trying to defend his wife and will be praised for it while Marguerite will be burned for lying. If Carrouges kills Le Gris, he will still get all the glory while Marguerite lives (Jager, 2021). Because of this overshadowing, Marguerite has even less control of her fate than she did before.

According to Damon, at the time in which the film is set, "a woman was considered property. Property of her father, and then eventually property of her husband," (Mears, 2021). Scott expresses this idea using Carrouges' horses; Carrouges loves Marguerite, but sees her as his property, not unlike one of his horses. This idea is further articulated through similarities between Marguerite and Carrouges' mare. Marguerite's assault is foreshadowed when her husband's pure white mare is raped by a black horse. When the mare becomes pregnant, Carrouges locks her in a stall, though Marguerite later frees her. This foreshadowing symbolizes how Marguerite was treated after the attack. Carrouges keeps her away from the world, to avoid tarnishing his trinket, but when Marguerite is attacked and becomes pregnant herself, he punishes her. While Marguerite is not kept in a stall like the mare, she is nevertheless isolated from the public because no one believes her. Ultimately, it is up to Marguerite to free herself by seeking justice for her attack.

This film brings to light how subjectivity and perspective blur black-and-white thinking to comment on how society has remained somewhat stagnant regarding women's agency. This film echoes the #MeToo movement when Marguerite's mother-in-law scolds her for causing a scene and reveals that the same thing happened to her when she was younger, just as it has happened to many women, both at that time and in the present. This parallel illustrates why women, even today, often do not speak up about assault. According to Comer, "this story is very relevant

because this problem hasn't gone away. So, I think we all definitely felt a real duty of care when approaching the subject matter" (Green, 2021).

The final battle, while gruesome, is not the worst part of the film. The silencing of Marguerite is what really makes this story impactful, especially when considering how it mirrors the modern #MeToo movement. Carrouges's pride gets the better of him as he, after learning of his wife's attack, immediately orders her to get on the bed so that he may also force himself upon her and thus ensure that Le Gris is not "the last man who knew her." Marguerite is further dehumanized since her assault is seen as a property crime against Carrouges, who does not care that she was attacked but instead is upset that his wife was attacked.

With each retelling of the same story, viewers come to understand how patriarchal privilege has allowed toxic masculinity to thrive. Because of their friendship, d'Alençon was going to use his power to reward Le Gris without considering whether the latter had indeed raped Marguerite. In the end, Le Gris loses the duel not because Marguerite told the truth, but because Carrouges bests him in combat. Although Marguerite is ultimately found to be telling the truth by the time the credits roll, justice remains unserved.

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