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DIGITAL RESEARCH METHODS

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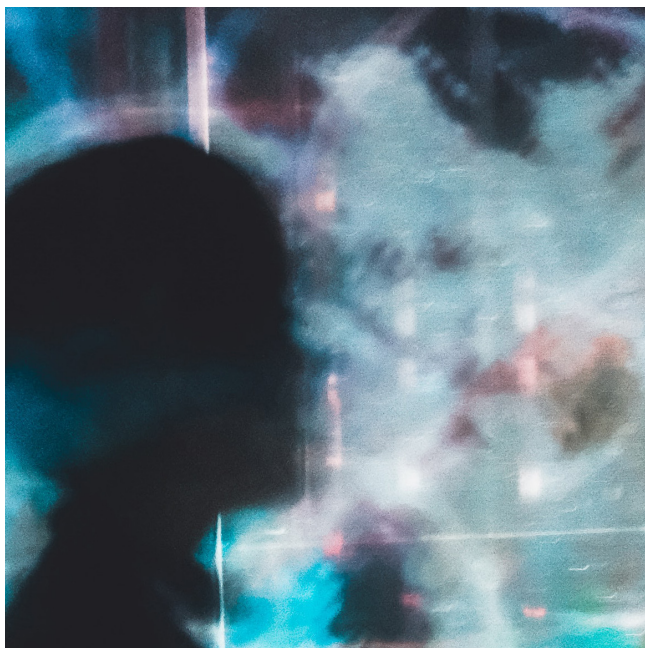
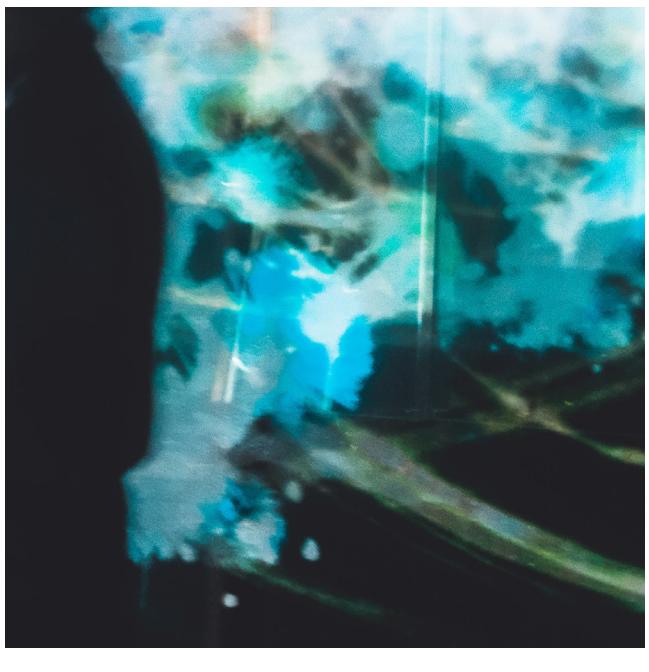

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JOURNAL HISTORY

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We would like to thank the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews for their continued support of this journal. In particular, we would like to thank Dr. Huon Wardle who functions as academic link to the journal. For the re-designimg of our logo we thank Katy Kibort, and for the help with setting up our type-set we thank Neil Hampshire. Last but not least we would also like to thank all our authors whose work brings this journal to life.

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Ethnographic Encounters was founded in 2011 to publish outstanding work by undergraduate students of Social Anthropology.

It was inspired by the Ethnographic Encounters project that second-year students in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews do every spring where they conduct their own fieldwork project.

The works that emerged from this were so interesting and diverse that students Zoe Miller and Emily Sheppard decided to start this journal with the support and guidance from Dr. Craig Lind.

In addition to this issue, we produce a yearly special issue where submissions are opened up to other projects from anthropology students.

We remain a student-run journal and every year since our foundation we have published a volume with the best of the Ethnographic Encounters projects submitted to the journal.

Our online archives can be found at: https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/SAEE/issue/archive

With special thanks to the University of St Andrews' Department of Social Anthropology.

EDITORS NOTE

We are proud to present the newest volume of Ethnographic Encounters!

We are pleased to publish this special issue of Ethnographic Encounters on digital research methods. The idea of this theme arose as we noted how the Covid-19 pandemic shifted many aspects of our lives to online contexts, and we reflected upon what this shift has meant for research practices. For the first time in the history of the journal, we have opened our submissions to all the departments of the University of St Andrews and to both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The first two articles of this issue focus on methodology of digital research with interdisciplinary features. Nicole Cizauskas and Benjamin Kao's work draws upon the authors' experiences of doing ethnographic research in online settings and compares insights from institutional research and sociocultural anthropology and considers the role of creative methods in both areas. They present a "Leaky Box" theory suggesting combining quantitative and qualitative methods for a more inclusive digital research methodology. Ann Gillian Chu's contribution expands upon this interdisciplinary perspective, as it draws upon her experience of conducting doctoral research in theology in Hong Kong and the potential of ethnography to move beyond "written theology" to "lived theology". The ethnography reflects on whether it is necessary to be physically present to conduct ethnographic research and considers the use of qualitative secondary data as a way of overcoming limits set by the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of access to the fieldsite.

Following methodological discussions, this issue incorporates four pieces of digital ethnographic research from undergraduate anthropology students at the University of St Andrews. Claire Percival's work reflects upon the use of online dating apps by students at the University of St Andrews during the pandemic. This allowed her insight into how individuals define dating and how connections are created in virtual settings, but also how this has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the online turn of many social interactions. Alice Palfreyman's contribution draws the notions of 'vanity' and 'validation' to show the cultural dilemma around young Scottish women's experience with posting selfies on Instagram. With thick descriptions of the motivations behind and interactions around selfies, Palfreyman argues that beyond the misogynist moral panic over vanity and narcissism and pressure on fake appearance under the male gaze, there is a claim to a broader space for female self-expression in the selfie culture. Eilidh Gilmour's contribution explores drag in the city of Dundee after the onset of the television show RuPaul's Drag Race, and how this online space in which drag can be virtually expressed translates to in-person drag communities. Gilmour consulted "anthropological theory regarding digital, gender studies and anthropology of the future" to contextualize the "social structure" of the drag sub-culture of Dundee and the ways in which it has been impacted by the television show. Evelyn Hoon's work interconnects her personal experience with becoming vegan and online communities. Hoon self-reflects on her personal journey of becoming vegan and connecting with other vegans, exploring how this identity can manifest and flourish within online spaces.

With these diverse contributions, we believe this issue of Ethnographic Encounters creates space for interdisciplinary reflections upon the new opportunities and challenges brought by the conditions of digital research, with an emphasis on what this means specifically for ethnographic research practices. If you have any queries, or if you are interested in joining the editorial team, please feel free to reach out to us at encounters@st-andrews.ac.uk.

Anna Louise Todsen
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Creativity and Digital Research Methodologies: A Conversation between Institutional and Anthropological Research

Benjamin C.H. Kao and Nicole Cizauskas

Key:
Benjamin C.H. Kao – "*I/my*"
Nicole Cizauskas – "I/my"

Abstract

Digital research methods are relevant to both institutional and anthropological research, and there is a need to address discipline orientated creativity principles in this field. In institutional research, quantitative data has a stronghold – this results in a "Leaky Box' theory, stating that quantitative-only data collection does not address all cohorts present in the tested student population, and that a quantitative and qualitative combined creative method would be more inclusive. Likewise, anthropology research on video games shares similar adherence to accepted models; using video games to understand human interactions is presently accepted only in multiplayer online games with intra-human interactions. However, research on single-player games with human and more-than human interactions are a valid, albeit novel, creative method in digital research. Creative research methodologies are not intended to be a silver bullet solution to paradigmatic flaws but rather it should guide us towards different disciplinary perspectives.

Introduction

Creative digital research methods have the potential to lead us towards novel paradigmatic understandings. However, when sharing research experiences in our respective fields – institutional research and sociocultural anthropology – both of us expressed frustration with practicing creative digital research methods in our research projects. In effect, this article is born out of various conversations we had about encounters in the proverbial field; problems that we believe are important to consider regarding digital research in theory and practice.

Institutional research refers primarily to work done by universities, colleges, or other educational bodies. The research aims to improve the institution; this is a broad purpose, and the research is interdisciplinary. Groups of institutions can collaborate on regional or global research encompassing collective communities. Institutional research is purpose-driven and focuses on making direct recommendations to units within the institution(s) based on the results of internal research. My experience in institutional research focused on the impact of emergency online learning on the student experience, with the goal of determining the positive aspects to keep for the future. This project is longitudinal and ongoing. My methods include online questionnaires, focus groups, and social media analysis.

Sociocultural anthropology's foray into digital space has been in five primary areas of concern which Geismar and Knox

(2021) articulate as: (1) interrogating the digital/human binary, (2) thinking about social infrastructures and the politics of the digital, (3) 'other' perspectives in digital spaces, (4) anthropology beyond the academy, and (5) digital ethnographic methods. Holding the virtual world of video games as a field site, *my* research aimed to explore emptiness as a heuristic to understand our relationships with/in technology in the Japanese role-playing video game, *Persona 5 Royal* (P5R). Following recent work in speculative anthropology, the (digital) humanities, and ethnographies of digital worlds, *my* research methods are a mix of participant observation, discourse analysis, and digital storytelling (Boellstorff et al. 2012; Tsing 2015; Byrd 2018).

The larger prosaic question that we aim to answer is: *What aspects of digital research are in demand?* Despite our collective frustrations, we believe that the increasing demand for digital research methods across disciplinary boundaries lays in their orientations towards accessibility and creativity. With a focus on methodology and visualization techniques, this article will outline our suggestions for expanding discipline relevant creativity based on our experiences in digital research.

Moving Beyond Institutional Research Binaries – Creativity and 'The Leaky Box of Digital Research Methods'

One of the issues we have encountered while conducting digital research is the persistence of misconceptions about the accuracy of creative methods. In Bergstrom and West's (2020) recent work, *Calling Bullshit: The Art of Skepticism in a Data-Driven World*, they outline the crisis that the easily accepted statistical data potentially contain vast (in their words) "bullshit." Quantitative data, as in statistically significant questionnaire responses, is often viewed as clean, accurate, and inherently truthful. As Kitchin (2014) points out, the notion that quantitative research is more accurate is an especially pertinent epistemological problem considering the 'big data revolution'. Kitchin (2014) illustrates how thinking that quantitative based big data can solve all problems is a fallacy: first, far from being exhaustive, big data is still only a representative sample from a non-omniscient vantage point; second, data cannot 'speak' for itself without human framing, so big data is still beholden to human design philosophies; moreover, the interpretation of data requires expertise not necessarily accessible for the layman. Not only does this fallacy harm the ability to be critical of quantitative data, but it also positions qualitative, especially unconventional or novel, research as "less accurate" compared to quantitative research.

How this issue transforms and manifests in practice can be articulated through my project analysing student opinion of emergency online learning at a university. I originally proposed several data-collecting methods to the institution, including online questionnaire, focus group, and social media feedback collection. The last one was my "creative" digital research method: utilizing an anonymous student-

run confession platform, 'St Fessdrews' on Facebook, to collect student feedback on online learning within a certain time-period by sorting anonymous submissions by keywords, such as "online learning", "remote learning", and "recorded lectures". In my proposal, the collected responses were to be analysed by categorising utterances into themes and observing the prevalence of different themes.

This proposal for novel creative methodology was met with criticism from the ethics committee, who stated that they did not see the point of collecting student feedback in this way instead of sticking to using online questionnaire. Their criticism reflects the persistent binary in institutional research of quantitative method (questionnaire) and the qualitative method (focus group) – anything that cannot fall into this binary is frowned upon. The reticence of the ethics committee is understandable because there is no framework in institutional research for analysing anonymous media data from students, making it difficult to adjust policies according to the findings. To address this concern, I present the metaphor of 'The Leaky Box of Digital Research Methodology' to justify the importance of moving beyond this binary.

I take the conventional binary in institutional digital research methodology as 'a leaky box': by using both questionnaires and focus groups, a researcher can form a "box" that catches the target data in a way that can be effectively translated into action points from the institutional perspective efficient way of catching the target data, but it is far from perfect. The box has small holes where leaks in target data flow from. Institutional research does not aim to exhaust target data and is content with their Leaky Box, as this type of methodology aligns with how institutional has always been. However, "tape" can be added to the outside of the box in the form of creative, unconventional digital research methods (Figure 1). These methods are never intended to be the most efficient or even effective at collecting the target data; they are simply aiming to catch data that may have escaped the conventional data collection methods.

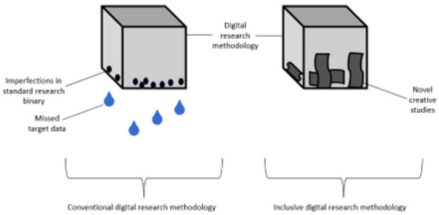

Figure 1: The Leaky Box. The above diagram visualizes the distinction between conventional digital research methodology, which allows target data to fall through the leaky box, and an inclusive digital research methodology, which tapes over box holes with novel creative studies.

So why does my anonymous social media feedback collection act as tape for research into student feedback on online learning, especially when some of the criticisms of the methodology are valid? After all, these anonymous posts are overly opinionated, containing streams of profanity and occasionally blatantly incorrect claims about the institution. They are not intended to be used as research

materials but are instead a collection of the most passionate arguments on the topic – polarizing, unorganized, and unconstructive. However, this is exactly what draws me to them. Traditional questionnaires and focus groups fail to elicit the strong feelings of a student writing an anonymous post at 3 a.m. during an exam period. These traditional responses are full of polite and cautious responses, where participants present their responses in a way that they believe to be appropriate to interact with the researchers. The anonymous media posts capture the opinion of students who ignore institutionally prompted questionnaires as fruitless and offensive and thus, give the tape to the 'Leaky Box'.

The holes in the leaky box are often marginalized and underrepresented groups of the tested population. For example, if all research occurs in the form of online questionnaires, the box does not encompass students who may not check their email frequently to spot the questionnaire or be cautious about the privacy issues. In the case of online learning, online-only data collection is only collecting opinions from students who are proficient in technology and regular users of platforms where said questionnaires are advertised. Elaborating further, the use of questionnaires as a single type of measurement excludes people to whom questionnaires are unappealing, such as dyslexic students who may not be willing to fill in copious amounts of free-text responses.

The issue of the conventional research binary of questionnaires and focus groups is not unique to my institution; I recently attended a seminar on creative digital research with other institutional researchers across the country, and not a single researcher in attendance had success with creative digital research yet. While social media and thematic analysis is common and recognized by organizations such as the *British Psychological Society* (Bps.org.uk 2022), mainstream institutional research still maintains that "formal", "clear-cut" questionnaires and focus groups should be the norm (Attride-Stirling 2001; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006).

Digital research at the institutional level has great potential to utilize an expansive and immersive world of data. We can manage to break out of conventional research binaries and begin to tape up our 'Leaky Boxes'.

Conceptualising Single-Player Video Games as Field-Sites in the Anthropology of Virtual Worlds

The impression that quantitative research is more 'accurate' than qualitative research is also a concern that anthropology has faced and sought to address in the present day. How anthropologists have historically overcome this problem is through 'dwelling' for a while within the confines of specific time-spaces (Coleman and Collins 2007). The premise is that by existing within a given site for an extended period – long-term participant observation – would allow the anthropologist to give a more accurate conception of social realities. This commitment towards 'dwelling' within has

extended towards our studies of digital realms – whether it is the ethnographies of Boellstorff (2015) and Nardi (2010) in the virtual worlds of *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* respectively or Miller's (2016) work on social media in an English village.

While the design of *my* research's methodology holds similar commitments to long-term participant observation that other works had, where *my* work differs is in the choice of field-site. In the anthropology of virtual worlds, the sites that anthropologists consider as important often have three main characteristics: *wide* spatio-temporal scope, with a *multiplicity* of *'real'* participants interacting at the site, that consists of mostly real people interacting with one another (Boellstorff et al. 2012). The ethnographer is purportedly able to understand these virtual worlds because of their similarities to fields in the 'real' world. The focus of these studies is mostly on how technology is utilized as a manner for mediating conversation and social relations.

P5R does not suitably fit any of these main characteristics that anthropologists of virtual worlds look for in their choice of field-site. As video game's world has a narrative that has a beginning and an end, its space is foreclosed. Single-player video game also involves only one human participant in the unfolding of its narrative. The space also mostly consists of more-than human interactions with the non-playable characters (NPCs). Because this choice of field-site deviated from the norm in the anthropology of virtual worlds, many people asked *me* whether this research can fit within anthropology as a discipline. The main point of contention is a lack of 'real' humans within the field-site other than the anthropologist/player. As anthropology broadly studies what makes us human, a field-site that is mostly devoid of human beings is unique and requires some unpacking.

To conceptualize this field, we could look at Kiri Miller's (2010) preliminary explorations of the potential for undertaking ethnographic fieldwork in single-player video game worlds. Her video games of focus are the *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* series – various game worlds that invites the player to partake in the criminal underworld of American landscapes. Miller (2010) presents three approaches to address the lack of ethnographic subjects, humans, in the video game's world. The first approach is to consider all the possible players of a single-player video game as an imagined community. Thus, to gain access to this community, whether it is the online forums or fan-sites, the individual player-ethnographer would need to immerse themselves in *GTA's* world. In this approach, the in-game fieldwork becomes as necessary pre-cursor to fieldwork in the 'real world. The second approach is to recognize the developers of the video game as the ethnographic subjects. This approach would consider the in-game terrain and characters as an extension of the developers' agencies. A research project of this ilk would most likely pair in-game fieldwork with analysing publicly available materials about the developers and interviewing the developers themselves.

The third approach, and the one I found most convincing, is to just simply treat

them like "actual places with human inhabitants". Here Miller (2010) points out the imperialist ethnographic tendencies that players acquire when they inhabit the avatars to explore the video game's world. In *GTA* and *P5R*, players only gain access to new areas in the game's world as the player progresses – emulating fieldworkers' gradual exploration and 'mastery' of new frontiers. Like *GTA*, *P5R* also requires the player to learn about what the avatar may already know as well as learning together as the game's narrative moves forward; therefore, signalling the potential importance of participant observation and respecting local knowledge. In short, Miller's (2010) summarizes it saliently when she notes that "the participant-observer who adopts the social role of a gameworld native—the avatar—has an enriched understanding of the gameworld's culture."

During Miller's (2010) ethnographic fieldwork, she expresses an anecdote of an accidental carjacking which guided her towards thinking about the differences between the player and avatar and what it says about the game developer's representations of African American culture and violence. Similarly, during *my* fieldwork, one of the earliest encounters with a non-playable character, the owner of the café, Sojiro Sakura (佐倉 惣治郎), who owned the attic where the player-protagonist was staying for the duration of the game, guided *my* thinking and questions.

On the morning of our first day of school, the player-protagonist did not expect Sojiro Sakura to provide *me*/him with a bowl of curry rice (チキンカレー – kare raisu) for breakfast. As an accused juvenile delinquent who was exiled to the game's representation of Tokyo to serve out his probationary period, the protagonist did not expect such kindness from somebody who seemed to be only taking care of him because his parents paid him to do so. Thus, Sojiro Sakura's offering of curry led *me* towards thinking about how the player-protagonist is displaced from their original context, the player: from the 'real' world into the video game's world and the protagonist: from his hometown to Tokyo. It is this displacement that made the ethnographic moment notable as an event that makes the absence of traditional providers of care such as parental figures in the player-protagonist's life visible.

This dual-experience of displacement highlights the in-between state that the player-protagonist occupies in the video game's world. On one hand, because of the distance in context, the avatar and the player are incommensurable – they can never be considered as truly the same. On the other hand, it is the similarities in experience that highlights the player-protagonist's co-complicity in their actions within the game's world. *I* agree with Miller (2010) when she says that this emulates a typical fieldwork experience: not a tourist, but also not local. Perhaps one of the main takeaways we could have as anthropologists is that 'dwelling within' single-player video game world requires us to directly confront our positionality in the field – an important ethical practice.

Through the outlining of single-player video games as a field-site, this section

aims to encourage anthropologists of virtual worlds to be open to creative approaches in ethnographic field-site selection. Thinking with Myers (2020), we can consider single-player video game as a para-site – "an experimental site that takes shape alongside fieldwork" and challenges us to reorient our ethnographic sensorial tendencies and 'witness' our disciplinary work in a potentially novel and productive light (Chua 2021; Dave 2021).

Conclusion – Short Meta-Analyses and the Imperfectability of Digital Research Methods

Evocative visualization techniques allow researchers to have an additional element of control over digital research perception and interpretation – a crucial acknowledgement for those intending to challenge the field's shortcomings. One topical example is the analysis done by Oh and Hwang (2021), relating to preventative intentions in COVID-19 news reporting and visualization. They touch on the importance of emotional visualization and the perception of threat, as well as the inevitably political nature of visualization. While research often aims to be apolitical in nature, the way that data is presented cannot feign this neutrality (Kitchin 2014; Bergstrom and West 2020). This also goes the other way; political ideology has an influence on the interpretation of "neutral" data. Oh and Hwang (2021) found that, excluding conspiracy theorists, conservatives reacted with greater fear to interactive COVID-19 data visualization. This distinction emphasizes the importance of decisions relating to digital data visualization on interpretation, and the real-world impact such decisions can have. It is the responsibility of digital researchers to take political ideology and interpretation into account when visualizing pseudo-neutral data.

Digital storytelling is one methodology that is up-and-coming within the field of institutional research. While it is complex to analyse (Oldfirestation.org.uk 2022), it offers a gestalt selection of data – including answers to questions that the researcher could not think to ask. It is a particularly crucial development for research that includes marginalized groups, as it offers an open and safe opportunity to explore these unquestionable answers. In anthropology, ethnographic 'data' is often considered as akin to storytelling. Thinking back on the 'Writing Culture' debates of the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, how data is represented or 'visualized' in narrative is an important question for digital researchers to consider (Clifford 1986; Geertz 1988). Just as these narratives could potentially lead to new outcomes, they can also occlude other research questions and/or function as a manner of continuing neo-colonial practices (Abu-Lughod 2008). As digital researchers, if we were to consider digital storytelling as a suitable methodological approach, we would also need to understand the potential pitfalls that may arise by adopting this methodology.

To conclude, these two brief meta-analyses of creative digital research methodologies intend to display how research will never be linear nor perfect. Research should not be aiming for this and should instead focus on being holistic and representative through a

constantly changing plethora of methods and models. Creative methodologies and their associated models, like the "leaky box" and single-player videogames as a field-site, are not intended to be a catch-all that resolves all paradigmatic flaws but rather it achieves our aim of encouraging new perspectives within our respective disciplines. It is only through the recognition of both the positives and negatives of our methodologies that we can truly achieve the creative potential that digital research promises.

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Digital Research and COVID-19: An Argument for using both Primary and Qualitative Secondary Data in a Hong Kong Ethnography

Ann Gillian chu

Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges of conducting theological ethnographic fieldwork during COVID-19, and proposes a solution of incorporating qualitative secondary data from online databases. The author draws from her experience in conducting her doctoral research in Hong Kong to explore the issues of whether ethnographic fieldwork has to be in a physical space, and how qualitative secondary data from online databases can be used. The study employs a methodology in which lived theology informs and shapes written theology. This paper asks whether being physically present in a field site is still necessary for conducting ethnographic fieldwork, since the pandemic has shifted much of human interactions online. The author argues that physically being in a field site is still necessary to build rapport with the community. This paper also considers the use of existing qualitative secondary data in conducting ethnographic field research. The author sees using qualitative secondary data as more than a way to overcome obstacles set by pandemic restrictions. Researchers who can access under-used data sets can triangulate with their primary data to give stronger support to their arguments.

I was in the middle of my fieldwork when COVID-19 broke out, and the pandemic shifted many aspects of my fieldwork to online contexts. Inevitably, I had to consider what the digital shift means for my research practices. In this paper, I will provide some background to my doctoral research project, and explain why I think lived theology necessitates an ethnographic approach. I will then provide some context on how Hong Kong society behaved during the pandemic, and argue for the importance of being physically present in the field, despite the wide use of online platforms that emerged during the pandemic. The pandemic limited my access to my field sites, and as such, I will elaborate on how using qualitative secondary data has been important for my project. Finally, I will offer some concluding thoughts on online-offline field sites, developed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My Doctoral Research and Lived Theology

I am writing my doctoral thesis with the School of Divinity at the University of St Andrews, focusing on the discipline of theological ethics. Through this research, I aim to ask questions on how languages of democracy and human rights interact with the Christian faith in Hong Kong. Furthermore, I explore how average, non-clerical Hong Kong Christians reconcile their faith and civic identity. This research requires an ethnographic approach, as average Christians rarely write down their religious practices. Through field observation and follow-up semi-structured interviews, I am able to sketch the lived theologies of several average Hong Kong Christians.

I am using Hong Kong's recent resistance movements to examine how Christians under a non-democratic regime handle civic engagement. The Umbrella Movement in 2014 paralysed key areas in Hong Kong for over two months by blocking major roadways. In the wake of the Umbrella Movement and civic actions in 2019, individuals and organisations are devoting more effort to considering Hong Kong's identity and core values. As an insider-researcher, I am motivated to conduct this project by my own identity as a Hong Kong Christian. I ask questions about how Christians in Hong Kong reconcile their religious convictions with their political inclinations.

Through this research, I find the voices of average Christians important, as expressed in their lived theologies. Written theologies are, in fact, a distillation of lived practice (Marsh, 2005, p. 6). Natalie Wigg-Stevenson (2014, p. 170) describes this relationship thusly: '[e]thnographic theologians acknowledge and accept that there is no theological "view from nowhere" that we can access, and that all theological claims are embedded in and produced by particular contexts, practices, and systems of power and privilege.' As an aspiring ethicist who employs ethnographic tools to conduct her research, I am of the conviction that the shared practices of individual Christians lead to theology worthy of being theorised. It may be thought that Caucasian male theologians have a monopoly to think in abstraction and impose their theologies for all to follow. However, I believe theological principles must emerge from and be cross-checked again by the communities they serve. Therefore, my methodology is to collect primary data through field observation and interview, and analyse qualitative secondary data from online oral history databases on individual Christians in Hong Kong. In addition, I analyse writings by Hong Kong theologians. By analysing three different forms of data, I aim to sketch a fuller picture of how average Hong Kong Christians navigate their faith and civic identity.

What published theologians write is already heavily edited and revised. I find it to be a third-hand account of what is actually happening in the church. Lived theologies, distilled by daily practices, is as or more important than theological writings, and much more difficult to decipher. This is because 'most Christians do not need a detailed theological understanding of their religious practices to participate fully in them' (Wigg-Stevenson, 2014, p. 26). Nevertheless, lived theologies are confusing, complex, contradictory, and sometimes incoherent. Conducting ethnographic research in theology does not mean that lived practices must trump written theology, or that they are not compatible. Instead, I would argue that the knowledge that emerges from such a context is itself a revelation of God, and that there is spiritual power in conducting ethnographic theological fieldwork.

Hong Kong During the Pandemic

I used ethnographic methods to conduct fieldwork in Hong Kong, which includes field observation and interviews. I immersed myself in two field sites, a broadly pro-establishment church and a broadly pro-democracy divinity school, observ-

ing gatherings and conversations, then conducted interviews with 18 individuals across both sites, to probe what I had observed more deeply. Some interviewees were referred to me by others, while some were loose acquaintances. In both cases, our pre-existing relationship gave us a foundation for our conversations, and the participants were able to see me as an insider despite being a researcher. Being in situ, especially in 2019-2020 when civic protests occurred, added to my interview process because I knew what the participants were experiencing. If our interviews were conducted online, I would have much less context for what the participants were experiencing on a daily basis.

COVID-19 is one of the biggest challenges in my research. From the beginning of the pandemic to 13 February 2022, there are 16,719 confirmed cases and 219 deaths in Hong Kong (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2022). For a city of 7.4 million, the number of cases and deaths is low compared to many other areas in the world (Census and Statistics Department, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2021). However, COVID-19 and its repercussions affected my fieldwork, which began in December 2019 and was meant to finish by the end of March 2020. My fieldwork slowed down significantly after the Chinese New Year in January 2020.

Digital Field Observation in the Midst of COVID-19

My field sites began operating on a limited basis in mid-January 2020. I could not access either location, so I did not make field observations in person; however, I observed the unique circumstances as gatherings moved online. Sunday church service was offered on Facebook Live or YouTube, and church fellowship and divinity school classes were held on Zoom, though since the pandemic, these have sometimes returned to in-person meetings with limited capacity and tracking measures. While understandable, these changes dramatically altered my relationship to my field site, which I had the chance to observe from behind a screen. There were far fewer interactions to observe in the online church site, as pastors were broadcasting their services and side conversations in the sanctuary ceased to exist. However, in the divinity school, interactions became more robust as students who may have been too shy to ask questions and give comments during in-person lessons, began in the online context to keep a running commentary on the side as the lecturer spoke. This made my act of observation very different from sitting in on in-person classes.

Since so much social activity has moved online for an extended duration, I wonder if it could supplant the traditional fieldwork paradigm, where we need to be physically present in a local setting, or whether we can simply conduct fieldwork from home? After all, technology has made remote access to field sites a possibility. Robert Kozinets, Pierre-Yann Dolbec, and Amanda Earley (2014, pp. 262-275) argue that:

> Online fields offer dramatically increased field site accessibility. […] Where once there were face-to-face meetings and conversations, supplemented by letters and phone calls, researchers now must also consider blogs, Twitter accounts, Facebook postings, LinkedIn groups and meetings, and many other forms of social media meetings and communication. Moreover, the online interactions are themselves complex: they can happen both privately and publicly, both asynchronously and synchronously, over different time periods, and with numerous contributors, as well as from several different site sources and in different formats.

Although the power of face-to-face interactions cannot be replaced or underestimated, I wonder what this online space means for *being in the field*, especially when studying locations that are potentially inaccessible due to political tensions. While it has not been an issue for me to enter my field site, I can see immigration and visas being a potential barrier to foreign researchers who wish to conduct fieldwork in contentious regions. In such cases, perhaps digital methods would be the only means for those researchers to conduct their fieldwork. If I were not able to access my field site physically, I would have immersed myself in social media, mass media, and diasporic communities in attempts to replicate the experience of physically being in the field.

However, in the rapidly changing landscape of human participant research, only certain practical aspects of the work have moved online. My research still consists of engaging a homogenous group that I could not otherwise reach had I not already connected with its members before it moved online. If I had not had an existing relationship with these churches and known their community and liturgy, it would not have made sense for me to connect virtually. There would be no reason for them to spend the time talking to me so frankly if I were not already a multifaceted human to them; not just a researcher, but also a daughter to my parents and a congregant in the church. Lila Abu-Lughod (1999, pp. 12) also reflects on how similar familial ties proved to be helpful in her field research in Egypt's Western Desert in her monograph, *Veiled Sentiments*. She found her father's presence in her anthropological fieldwork immensely helpful, as she later discovered that the Bedouins 'for whom belonging to tribe and family are paramount and the education of girls novel, would assume that a woman alone must have so alienated her family, especially her male kin, that they no longer care about her.' Abu-Lughod's experience resonates with mine: if I had not had family members cultivating these relationships with the Hong Kong Christian communities before my arrival, it is unlikely that I would have been received so warmly. For example, I was given access to book meeting spaces to conduct interviews, and my gatekeeper from the church was very enthusiastic about my project. My church site is not known to be welcoming to outsiders, as they have been previously targeted for their political stances. Without the relationships my family members had previously cultivated, it is unlikely they would have let me conduct research within their community.

Likewise, Geert Hofstede (1980, p.215) observes the differences in Western and Chinese thinking. He finds that the Chinese word for (hu)man 'includes the person himself plus his intimate societal and cultural environment which makes his existence meaningful.' Hofstede's argument suggests that digital methods might not be able to bridge strangers, especially in cultures such as Hong Kong with a more collective community, even if those digital tools do exist. Furthermore, there is 'the somewhat false distinction between online and offline social "worlds"' (Kozinets et al., 2014, pp. 265-275). Without the connection in the physical world, it is hard to justify the immediate acceptance of virtual connections, especially by those who are not comforta-

ble with virtual environments. I find that having the virtual space facilitates my understanding of my field site, but it in no way supplants my in-person field observations. Nevertheless, it added depth and nuance to my research, as it digitised and captured interactions between participants that would otherwise have been lost, because I cannot record and transcribe every conversation going on around me.

Use of Qualitative Secondary Data in Research on Church and Practice

A more challenging consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is that, in addition to the 18 participants I interviewed in my primary data collection, I turned to other data sources to compensate for lost time and interview opportunities. This adjustment, made in the wake of unforeseeable limitations of the field, actually had the effect of strengthening my overall research design and deepening my understanding of Christian practice in Hong Kong. Hong Kong society has undergone tremendous socio-political change since the pandemic restrictions began. Given the implementation of the National Security Law on 30 June 2020 and the implementation of electoral reform on 30 March 2021, which were both perceived as means to tighten the freedoms of speech and assembly in Hong Kong, it would be unlikely for me to recruit further interview participants. Even if there were people who would still wish to speak to me, our conversations would differ greatly from pre-pandemic times due to these new restrictions. Therefore, I used qualitative secondary data to supplement my research, rather than turning to new participants.

Qualitative secondary analysis occurs when previously gathered data is reanalysed, usually by different researchers. As Sharon Greenwood (2020) observes: 'Pre-existing datasets are typically under-used, despite the vast investment and promotion from research councils.' Although my use of such data is motivated by the limitations of my field, using data collected by other researchers allows me to explore new questions not previously considered by the original researchers by applying different analytical approaches, strategies, and frameworks.

After considering several sources, I finally settled on two online archival sources, both of which provide raw data, such as video and audio footage, as well as transcripts and translations, so I could code and analyse the data in the same fashion as the interviews I conducted. This would not have been possible if only the analysed text were preserved. The first online video archive is from the University of British Columbia, titled *After the Protest: A Vancouver Archive of the Umbrella Movement*, which contains interviews with Hong Kongers who experienced the Umbrella Movement and are now based in Vancouver, Canada (Hong Kong Studies Initiative, The University of British Columbia, 2021). A second online video archive is by the Hong Kong Baptist University, titled *An Oral and Documentary History of Hong Kong Protestant Christians: Religious Discourse, Social Participation, and Identity Construction from 1970 to 1997*, which hosts interviews with members of the Hong Kong Christian community (Department of Religion and

Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University, 2021). As I analysed and coded these transcripts with the same deductive codes from my primary data analysis, I found that the issues these participants wrestled with are similar to those of my participants. For example, several participants from both my primary and secondary data sets raised concerns about the institutional church being too involved in social action, such that they neglected evangelism. This demonstrates an inward-looking theology among pro-establishment Hong Kong Christians that is consistent with different sets of data.

This digitally mediated encounter helped me to deepen my understanding of the communities I studied, as the archival interviews were mainly with members of the silent or baby boomer generation, while my interview participants were mainly from generations X, Y, and Z. The use of qualitative secondary data provided perspectives that I was not able to tap into, and furthered my understanding of the field. With the raw material available, even though I was not the person conducting the interviews, I could hear how the questions were asked and observe the natural behaviour of the interlocutors. Being personally acquainted with the archives' interviewers also helped me understand how their participants might perceive them. Both interviewers are middle-aged Chinese male professors, and their social status would likely be perceived differently from mine, as a younger Chinese female doctoral student. This may possibly cause different responses from the participants, which I took into account during my analysis. For example, in the interviews I conducted, participants sometimes challenged my researcher status, or perceived me as naïve. During those interviews, I leaned into this presumption to get them to elaborate on their thoughts and opinions. As I watched the videotaped interviews from the qualitative secondary data, I did not find the same dynamic between interviewers and participants.

There are also ethical issues in the analysis of qualitative secondary data. As Isabelle Dufour and Marie-Claude Richard (2019) point out:

> [U]sing secondary qualitative data raises many ethical issues in terms of consent, opportunity and risks, data sharing, transparency, clarity and anonymity, permission and responsibility. The quality of data can also be problematic. Data can be incomplete or outdated or may have been collected improperly, and it can be difficult to assess the quality of the original data collection procedure. The breadth and richness of primary data can also be crucial when addressing new research questions.

The new ethical consideration to obtain university approval was whether the reuse of publicly available secondary data requires additional consent from database holders, which I obtained by email. The process gave me a good perspective to consider what constitutes the ethical use of qualitative secondary data.

There is also the issue that an interview designed for an oral history project is substantially different from a semi-structured interview that focuses on a specific research question. However, I find that because the original aim of the research

was similar to mine, that is, seeking out ideas of democracy and rights, and the civic participation of individual Christians, the secondary data is highly relevant to my project. I coded their transcripts using the same codes as I would for the interviews I had conducted, which allowed me to crosscheck my interpretation of both my primary and secondary data, even though my interviews were conducted at a later date. I coded both my primary and secondary data using the same set of deductive codes, and as such, created a framework for understanding the different sets of data through the same themes. The interviews I conducted worked well to triangulate the secondary data because I could observe consistencies in the speakers' theological interpretations of actions and events between my primary and secondary data sources. I have not found tension between the two data sets; in fact, I believe including qualitative secondary data strengthened my argument, because the interviews conducted by different researchers with different participants at different times generated consistent results. The analysis of previously collected data is beneficial, especially seeing that it supports my primary data collection, and provides access to rich descriptive data from another perspective (Dufour & Richard, 2019). With the intensifying oppression of civic freedoms in Hong Kong, the availability of these digital archives has new political value, as the newly implemented National Security Law will make such a research unlikely in the future. These digital archives will serve as a valuable record of a time when Hong Kongers still felt they could speak freely on issues related to faith, freedom, and rights.

In analysing my secondary data with the same codes as my primary data, I am able to triangulate and validate my interpretations of whether democracy and rights language are Christian, and how average Hong Kong Christians reconcile their faith and civic identity, ensuring that I am neither *too close* nor *too distant*.

Conclusion

Although the use of qualitative secondary data in my research and the consideration of prohibitions and opportunities with online field observation were never in my plans, these changes have shaped me as a researcher. I consider undertaking a doctoral degree not simply as writing a thesis, but more importantly, forming who I am as a scholar. Scholarship is about thinking of creative solutions while facing the challenges and obstacles of conducting research.

Although my research questions have not changed as a result of using digital methods, I find that my initial findings have been strengthened with respect to how democracy and rights language have influenced how Hong Kong Christians express themselves. Using digital means, including digital archives, has added depth and nuance to my research, as I had data from various sources from which to develop my arguments and assertions.

My research methods are based on my conviction that lived theology informs written theology. How Hong Kong Christians live out their daily lives, with all its messiness, and their occasionally self-contradictory thoughts, is itself theology.

The point of conducting qualitative research is not to iron out inconsistencies, but rather, to find God and revelation precisely within those contradictions. Doing theology should not be monopolised by published theologians from the West since, as the saying goes, actions speak louder than words

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The Student Experience with Dating within the COVID-19 Pandemic: Dating Apps, Isolation and Blurred Lines

Claire Percival

Abstract

When the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic was declared in the UK in March 2020, I, like many others, turned to Tinder and began having conversations with strangers , whilst confined to the four walls of my bedroom, as emotions of isolation, and anxiety grew nationally (YoungMinds, 2021). As restrictions eased, I forgot I had the app, but come September, with Covid-19 guidelines tightening again when I returned to university, I found myself turning to Tinder, where I met my boyfriend. My personal experience with dating. This made me reflect about the ways in which university students have been dating within the pandemic, inspiring me to have conversations with my peers. The main topics that arose was how to define dating, with the distinction between dating and a relationship, and why people were turning to dating apps, when Burton and Baym claim that the people are unable to make real connections with others online, viewing profiles as personas (Baym, 2015; Burton, 2020). We also discussed the emotional impact of the pandemic towards attitudes of dating, the timing of relationships changing, and finally what it was actually like to go on dates throughout the pandemic.

Methodology

I talked with students aged 18-21 studying at a UK university. Most of these conversations took place over Zoom, with the exceptions being Finn, Jack, Eilidh, Stephan and Jemima whom I interviewed in person as I had formed a support bubble due to living alone[1]. I also reflected on the period I had spent on dating apps, and my own relationship which started during the pandemic. Being interested in dating in a broad sense, I included people who had been dating prior to pandemic but were currently not at the time of speaking to myself, those dating throughout the pandemic, and those in long term relationships, all from a variety of sexual orientations. All my interlocutors followed me on Instagram, and were aware of my relationship status, thus feeling comfortable to talk to me about their experiences, as they knew I would not judge their actions due to our prior connections. The conversations for this project predominantly revolved around the difficulties of dating throughout the pandemic with lockdowns and restrictions, regarding emotions and motivations, with a strong focus on the impact of online applications.

Definitions

To begin, however, we should look at what it means 'to date'. According to the Cambridge dictionary, dating can be defined as 'to regularly spend time with someone you have a romantic relationship with' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). However, this differs from the

1. To ensure privacy, all interlocuters have been given a pseudonym.

views expressed by those I spoke to. Each believed there exists a difference between 'dating' and a relationship. Finn, a nineteen-year-old who has been in a long-term relationship for a year, spoke of how he does not consider himself dating his current partner:

"I wouldn't say I'm dating my partner now. I think dating is the pre-stage before the whole boyfriend-boyfriend, girlfriend-girlfriend, boyfriend-girlfriend thing. When we were first getting together, that was when we were dating. Talking, getting together, dating – I'd put that under the umbrella of dating, whereas established is definitely a clean solid line."

Finn was very serious when talking about the distinction. To him, dating means the preliminary stage of getting to know a partner, before being certain you want o enter an relationship with them. Additionally, dating is a largely ambiguous term, which encompassing many different elements that revolve, around getting to know someone. This matched a consensus about how 'dating' and 'being in a relationship' are different, with Stephan talking of how there were two steps in a relationship:

"I guess, dating is the first phase, just kind of going on multiple dates with the same person but not necessarily being in a relationship; being in a relationship is after you officialise it through having a conversation."

It is clear that the idea of dating, versus a relationship is about two distinct stages for many students, with the boundaries contrasting between passive action and active relationship status. Additionally, the idea of 'officialising' a relationship through a conversation implies a level of formality, creating an almost bureaucratic element to the status. This links with the examples of Bogle, who, when talking to students about their ideas of dating within a college environment, spoke of relationships being formal, as opposed to the more comfortable and common sexual encounters of dating (2008). Although dating is still casual in the community I spoke to however, it is more about becoming acquainted to a person as opposed to sexual encounters.

Thus, the students I spoke to largely agree that the process of dating is an informal preliminary stage of familiarising yourself with someone and can cover a large portion of the connection prior to progressing into an 'official', established relationship.

Motivations – Dating Apps

Looking behind the motivations of dating during the pandemic was interesting, predominantly because there was a lack of drive. Personally, I downloaded Tinder out of boredom, from having to stay within my family home. I was not particularly searching for dates – in fact, the first date I went on was six months later. And I was just one of many who turned to Tinder, with Sunday 29th March 2020 being the day Tinder recorded a record-breaking three million swipes (Stoicesu, 2020:4).

When speaking to people who also downloaded dating apps during the pandemic, similar motivations were found – that of wanting to talk to new people. However, there was much more stress put on the idea of heavily relying on the apps to provide this opportunity. As opposed to the idea of interacting with people through friends or in classes (which is the main way

of meeting a partner at university according to Knox and Wilson), with classes being online, and a lack of social events, the world of dating apps reated a possibility to maintain essential socialisation (1981:256).

Jemima, whose three-year relationship ended at the beginning of the pandemic, spoke of how she downloaded Tinder, because she wanted to meet people – something she ould not do organically due to lockdown restrictions. She explained she was hoping for a romantic attraction, and wanted to meet those she matched with. Here, her experiences of online dating differs from literature on the topic, as it is often claimed that people become confused between the 'virtual' and 'real' world, with the construction of identity in disembodied places resulting in contrasting relationships when meeting in person (Baym, 2015; Burton, 2020). To Jemima, the people she met online were accurate reflections, as opposed to personas, as Burton argues. This indicates that online dating within the pandemic predominantly offered an opportunity to create connections with individuals, through a virtual profile, even if one was unable to meet in person for a long period.

However, Fiona, a twenty-year-old who has never been in a relationship, downloaded Tinder when having drinks with her friends after returning to university in September. She said it was for fun, and had no intention of meeting anyone she spoke to. For her it was another social media, a source of entertainment – thus the primary function of the app was twisted to match the goal of enjoyment. This demonstrates the theory of user and gratification, which has been developing in the field of psychology since the 1960s. According to this theory, the use of online spaces is linked to feeling satisfied in areas such as identity and, social communication while encouraging , escapism, and amusement through an online space (Ruggiero, 2000:28). According to Fiona, the pleasure she received from online interactions, simulated the possibility of dating while, providing enough enjoyment, so that she never felt the need to physically meet in person, or commit to anything with the people she met online. The act of using a dating app took on a game-like quality, something one does with friends in a group setting for entertainment.

Stephan, a twenty-year-old who met his girlfriend on Tinder during the pandemic, provided a balance between the Fiona and Jemima's opposing uses of the app. He said

> "I was just casually seeing who was on Tinder. If the conversation doesn't work, I wouldn't want to meet. I wasn't going on it too seriously, and I wasn't messaging people too seriously either, I was just like laughing a bit, but seeing who was out there".

The idea of casually using Tinder to message others in order to create a connection is reflected by Miller, who- when looking at the use of social media in the Glades in England found that people were using Tinder to create a fun way to engage with people, with the ability to message providing an opportunity to decide whether they want to meet in person (2016:103). Furthermore, Stephan's attitude towards meeting others reflects

the idea that people's online profiles are accurate depictions, similar to Jemima's opinion.

The different interactions and intentions people have had on Tinder indicate how there is not a single use for the app. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a higher reliance on apps to meet people. However, whether this progresses to the next stage relies heavily on there a strong enough connection between to users to facilitate effort in furthering the relationship. For those who are using it in a social environment with friends, interactions remain solely virtual.

Emotions

Throughout the pandemic, many have faced isolation, alongside anxiety and frustration. A Young Minds Survey, published in the summer of 2020, found that 87% of respondents have expressed emotions of loneliness during the lockdown, and 80% saying their mental health has suffered (YoungMinds, 2021). These feelings also surround ideas of dating, with a sense of exhaustion arising, leading people to focus more on themselves, and how to increase their happiness on their own. Emily illustrated:

> "I don't have the desire to invest my time and energy in people who don't even seem that great anyway… it didn't seem worth it… I'm really busy, I'm doing really well, and I don't necessarily feel I need to look for an extra thing at the moment."

This was also echoed by Amelia, who said:

> "It sounds really cringey but I'm just really happy with life, everything's good vibes– if someone were to come along it would just enhance that, it's not like I need someone."

These points emphasise the idea that dating imposes on an individual's personal life. As opposed to being simply an addition, which is gained in a relationship, the process of physically looking for someone is largely draining. When someone is happy, there is less focus on attempting to find satisfaction through dating. Interestingly, both mentioned how they are happy currently, despite the ongoing pandemic, which differs from other people's experience of struggling with isolation.

Looking at the other side of the coin, however, we can see the idea of loneliness. Blake et al.'s conducted research focused on university students, which has highlighted the mass feelings of isolation students are experiencing regarding Covid-19(Blake et al., 2020). This mirrors Stephan, who downloaded Tinder as he:

> "Didn't have many people at this point, just Ewan really, and a few people in the flat. It was a bit sad sometimes."

Stephan's lack of contact with people, as he had only a small number of people in his household, incentivised him to search for other social connections that would provide him with happiness. In this sense, relationships are positioned as something that provides a distraction from negative emotions. The use of dating apps in this situation to deal with negative emotions has been common in the pandemic, with a survey by QuackQuack finding that 59% of people older than eighteen turn to dating apps to held mitigate anxiety (EntertainmentNews, 2021). We can therefore see that, as opposed to providing

excitement, and positivity people feel fatigued, and do not want to put in the effort or time to dating. Many associate relationships as something that one searches for only if they are feeling socially isolated. Furthermore, there is an idea of 'needing' to look for a relationship when feeling low, as opposed to being content in oneself. Overall therefore with pandemic isolation already affecting peoples emotions, reactions to dating differed, either finding peace within, or finding someone to spend time with.

Timeframes

Another topic that frequently arose during conversations with people in long-term relationships was the idea of time. For many, throughout the past year, ideas of time have become warped, with days merging into each other due to the monotony of lockdown. And the impact is has had on relationships is drastic. Jack and Kiley both entioned that, if it had not been for the pandemic, they would not have moved in with their partner. Kiley said:

"It definitely felt – not too big a step, but it did feel like too big a step. We made it work, but we would never had moved in together now, if it wasn't for covid."

Here, internal conflict is evident for Kiley, as the move to living together posed a different dynamic to their relationship. The emphasis on 'never' highlights how, as a result of the pandemic, their relationship has been altered as opposed to, what she would have expected at this stage.

"We're definitely a lot closer quartered than we would have been if it wasn't for the pandemic. Because obviously you're spending a lot more time together, you're advancing much faster, condensing it into shorter periods."

Similarly, Jack, a twenty-one-year-old said: In this, both express the opinion that their relationships were forced to develop and mature much faster due to the pandemic. With the timeframe being condensed, feelings are intensified, alongside increasing pressure in defining and continuing the relationship.

Dates

An issue brought up which I was not previously conscious of was that of blurred lines in regards to social interactions during the covid-19 pandemic, and not knowing whether one was going on a date, or simply spending time as friends. This was the case for Diana and Judy, who explained they had been on walks with someone, assuming that it was a casual, friendship meeting, but the other expected a romantic element. Diana explained the awkwardness of her encounter:

"I found it difficult to define whether it was a date or not. In the first case, it was like literally being asked out before the pandemic and then you go for a coffee or a drink, and you know in your mind that's definitely a date. This time it was like you go on a walk, but I'd been going on a walk with so many friends it was sort of difficult to have a… there wasn't much difference. I don't think either of us were particularly sure."

With the pandemic, and the lack of ability to go to places, the relationship felt much more ambiguous. Rather than having clarity in what the relationship was, due to the monotony, and limited actions one could do, experiences began to feel the same, whether it was between

romantic or platonic contacts. The idea of being 'asked out' before the pandemic, provided much more precision regarding the intentions of the meeting while also introducing an element of formality. In the story Diana told, there was a lack of clear communication. This indicates that the experience of dating in the pandemic, has resulted in a lack of intentions; instead of knowing where one stands regarding romantic interest, due to only being able to do the same things, no matter the person, intentions are vague, resulting in awkward situations.

Diana also mentioned the issue of trying to follow the guidance of staying two metres apart: *"I said 'don't come too close to me'* which is always a bit weird." This was not the case for Jemima however:

> "After my breakup, when I started dating, and going on dates, the restrictions had eased a bit more. The first date I went on we walked around town in Edinburgh. I didn't feel so obliged to keep my distance when meeting new people."

The idea of aintaining distance was not at the forefront of her mind, which relates to Lauren:

> "You get distracted, and taken away with the flow of a date. I wouldn't try and keep my distance. If you actually wanted to have a relationship with someone, it would be strange to not have any physical contact with them."

This mirrors Jemima's opinion, that if one was actually interested in dating someone, they were less likely to avoid physical contact. Additionally, when there is clarity that it is a date, the need to keep the physical distance was is disregarded, as physical connection plays a role in romantic compatibility. Furthermore, the idea of getting "caught up in the flow of a date" emphasises how dating is seen as a social action and is categorised as a positive event. With ideas of spatial distancing not being prevalent when on dates, despite the risk of Covid-19, it appears that the environment remains similar, intensely focused on seeing if a connection exists with the other individual.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has analysed at the experience of dating within the pandemic from the perspective of students. With the inability to meet in an organic setting, a large amount of attention has shifted towards dating apps such as Tinder. However, opposing the literature of how online dating connections are fabricated, it is seen that it has become a large source of opportunity to relate to others for the students, even if being used in a 'not too serious' manner.

Being an emotional period for many, the fact that dating, although perceived as being largely casual, still demands high amounts of efforts has resulted in, a reduction in the focus on the need to date when people feel happy with themselves. This has made young adults now associate , dating with feelings of loneliness or isolation.

Interestingly, however, for those who have been actively dating, the physical elements of a relationship have remained permanent. When enthusiastically interested in pursuing a new relationship, there is less focus on the need to maintain

distance, whereas in Diana's situation, who felt confusion surrounding the motivations of meeting, there was more of an incentive to remain apart.

As for those already in an established relationship, the additional pressures of moving in together has created a strong element of maturity with relationships becoming much more serious.

Overall, during the Covid-19 pandemic, dating appears to not be a main priority for students. The easy-going nature of dating, prior to becoming established, remains with the events of meeting online, and going on a walk as a date being the only large shift. How attitudes will change once the pandemic ends however, is still to be seen.

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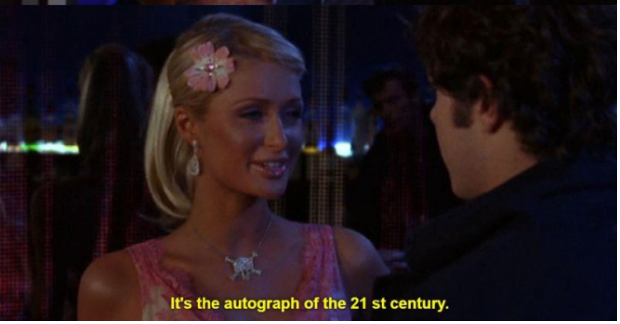

"Why do we post selfies?": Vanity, Validation, and the Virtual Communication of Selfies on Instagram

Alice Palfreyman

Abstract

Over the last two decades, we have watched the selfie grow and establish itself in the virtual sphere, especially on the social media site Instagram. This article considers the role that selfies play in our communications and social relations in an online space through engaging with the experiences of young, Scottish women. It explores their thoughts on taking, posting, and interacting selfies in order to understand the meanings and motivations behind selfies on Instagram. It will find that regardless of how "vain" taking selfies may be, posting them is a method of virtual communication that cannot be ignored. This article also breaks down the association between women, selfies, and vanity through analysing the phenomenon of moral panics, and how this impacts the interlocutors in their selfie taking habits.

Select the photo. Write the caption. Post. It is like a routine. As I wait for the likes and comments to come in after posting a carefully angled picture of my face onto Instagram, I wonder, why did I post that? "Just because I wanted to" seems like the easy answer, but I sense there is more to it than that. I scroll down my feed to see more selfies from friends and acquaintances, and I wonder why did they post their selfies? I am not sure if everyone ponders a simple social media post as much as this, but I feel that this is a question that needs to be answered: why do we post selfies?

By reaching out to thirteen young Scottish women, I set out to answer this question. Some post selfies regularly, some only occasionally, others never post selfies at all, yet they all had their own thoughts, ideas and experiences on selfies which provided me with great insight into our perceptions of and motivations behind taking and posting selfies.

Through my investigation into why we post selfies, I discovered an interesting perception of selfies as being "vain". This led me to consider whether we post selfies purely out of vanity, or if the practice carries more social implications? I also found a relationship between selfies, vanity, and women, which indicated that viewing selfies as expressions of vanity has more to do with the social perceptions of women than of the selfies themselves. My conversations with young Scottish women allowed an in-depth exploration into these issues, as they shared their own experiences of taking, posting, and viewing selfies. These issues are what I

hope to explore further in this paper, by looking into my interlocutors' experiences with selfies and situating these experiences within the broader context of being a woman in online spaces.

The Conversations

As much as I would have loved to sit down with my friends, scroll through Instagram and have a chat about selfies over a cup of coffee, the lockdown restrictions in place during my research did not permit this. The conversations with informants were held via the video call platform Zoom, which was convenient as I was able to reach friends regardless of where they were. Having said this, the digital divide came with its disadvantages. The online space felt like an unnatural social environment, and I held a hyperawareness to the physical barrier of a computer screen and the more abstract barrier of the Internet between me and my interlocutors. At times our speech would get delayed, or we would encounter a technical difficulty that would interrupt the conversation. With that being said, I hope the fact that the informants were all friends of mine counteracted some of these barriers as our familiarity made it easier to smooth over any bumps. In fact, I was not disappointed by the conversations – talking with friends and connecting with the experiences of fellow women truly enriched my research. However, trying to balance friendship and research did not come without challenges. I knew from the start that I would have to let go of any assumptions I may have had about my friends' experiences and perceptions to allow for a space in which conversation could be led by them so that their own accounts could inform my research.

It is also important to acknowledge that as a white woman, talking to mainly other white women, this research will not reflect the experiences of everyone. My position as a cis woman in society pushed me to explore the relationship between women and selfies, but a more comprehensive view of this relationship would require a wider analysis. Furthermore, to ensure that my short-term research could be more focused, I only held conversations with Scottish women, as I felt my own Scottish identity could help me relate to participants and their experiences. I believe that having a mutual understanding of what it is like growing up and living in Scotland as a young woman allowed for more fluid and dynamic discussions with informants. Therefore, the question, "why do we post selfies?", is mainly considering the experiences of young Scottish women, although my interlocutors do come from different racial, social, economic, and religious backgrounds, which I hope, alongside engaging with literature on different demographics, will open a discussion that reflects the experiences of women more generally.

Are Selfies Vain?

After starting the conversation with what I thought would be a light-hearted question, "Do you take selfies?", an informant tells me it is embarrassing to admit that yes, she does. She explains how she feels arrogant and vain when she thinks about taking selfies and that she is "feeding into selfie culture". In admitting that she has spent up to an hour trying to get the

right selfie, another interlocutor tells me that if someone were watching her, they would think she was a "narcissist", yet in a "light-hearted" way as she puts it. These informants were not alone, with many of them expressing that taking selfies may be considered vain, with some noting that they feel an element of narcissism when taking selfies or that others will assume that the selfies that they see on their social media feeds are signs of vanity. This truly caught my attention – why did so many of these young women associated being perceived as vain with taking a simple picture?

First, we should consider what is meant by "vanity". In a formal definition, physical vanity can be described as "an excessive concern for, and/or a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of one's physical appearance" (Netemeyer et al., 1995: 612). It is the sense that one is obsessed over the way they look, and it typically has negative connotations (Durvasula et al., 2005: 182). Therefore, as pictures which capture one's appearance through a photograph of the self, it is easy to see how selfies have been caught up in the concept of vanity. Informants told me that they may take selfies if they feel good about themselves and their appearance, or if they want to feel good – as taking selfies can give them a confidence boost. This indicates that selfies themselves could be an act of vanity, as they reflect the "concern for" and "positive view of" appearance as previously described. However, it is when we consider the act of posting a selfie that things become more interesting.

Informants had many reasons behind posting - or not posting - selfies on Instagram, but one thing is clear, they post selfies in order to share a part of themselves with others, or refrain from posting selfies so as to keep a part of themselves private. These two common themes amongst interlocuters highlight how the act of posting a selfie holds less emphasis on physical appearance, and more on interactions with others. As pointed out by Miller et al. (2016: 158), when we use the word "narcissist" to describe selfies, we are ignoring the ways in which selfies can be used as tools for understanding "identity, aspiration and social expectations" as well as "to maintain social relationships". This suggests that there is more to a selfie than just vanity, and that they can be used as tools to communicate one's identity and facilitate social interactions. In Broadbent's work on social networks, she finds that when one posts to a semi-public site, such as Facebook, they are not directly communicating with an individual but to a wider audience. This can make it easier to communicate as one does not need to negotiate the nuances of individual social interactions (Broadbent 2011: 62). This is supported by one interlocutor noting that she likes to post online to keep her family and friends updated on her life because it feels "arrogant" to message those updates to individuals. Here we can see how Instagram selfies can be considered a tool to communicate a message to others through a more indirect approach which avoids some of the barriers to communicating one-on-one. But what message does one want to share through posting a selfie?

As interlocutors described to me, they may post a selfie on Instagram if they feel confident in a picture, want to show off an

outfit, or to commemorate a special event. Among those who did not share selfies on Instagram, one noted that they did not want the attention that came with posting a selfie, another said that the selfies they take may not be "worth posting" as they did not show an above average level of appearance, and another stated that they weren't trying to impress anyone with a selfie. One informant told me that she sometimes "hides" a selfie in a carousel post (multiple pictures in one post that viewers can swipe through) to avoid judgement from older family members who may disapprove of selfies. Furthermore, in a discussion as to why we thought women from working-class backgrounds tend to post more selfies than those from middle-class backgrounds, an informant who grew up in the same working-class community as me, suggested that working-class women may be trying to "prove they have money" by posting selfies with designer products. Through the act of posting a selfie to Instagram, informants hope to share a part of their life to their followers, perhaps to communicate the idea that they are happy, wealthy, or confident. In contrast, those who do not post selfies tend to do so as a result of not wanting to share a certain aspect of themselves on the Internet, typically in order to avoid unpleasant interactions such as judgement or excess attention. Therefore, it is clear that many of the motivations for posting, or not posting, a selfie are driven by social interactions with others.

This is further illustrated through the sense of reciprocity felt by many of my informants, in relation to their interactions with other people's selfies. When I asked if they felt there were any expectations or norms to follow when interacting with selfies on Instagram, they often noted a mutual exchange of likes – that is, you should like someone's post if they like yours. They also expressed that they would expect some close friends to comment on their selfie as support or to provide validation. This contradicts Broadbent's observations that larger networks such as Facebook have less sense of reciprocity than smaller networks like the South Korean social networking site Cyworld (Broadbent, 2011: 64). If Instagram is a platform that allows for a larger network, like Facebook, why can we observe expectations of reciprocity? Cyworld's network is close-knit, which carries social obligations that one must follow in order to build connections with others (Broadbent, 2011: 65). It is possible that the sense of reciprocity experienced by my informants is the result of them having a closer network of followers, as well as the intention to build or maintain social relationships with others through interaction with their selfies. These expectations to comment on close friends' selfies or to like the selfies of those who like yours demonstrate that selfies allow for social interactions which help to shape and maintain social relationships in a virtual space.

Posting selfies can communicate certain ideas to others, and interactions with selfies are influenced by a sense of obligated reciprocity. It can be argued that through the act of posting a selfie, there is more importance attached to the social interactions and implications behind a selfie, than to one's physical appearance.

Therefore, we post selfies not purely out of vanity, but as a social tool to communicate with others in the online space.

Selfies, Vanity, and Women

Perhaps what struck me the most about the perception of selfies as vain was the self-doubt that it seemed to trigger in the young women I spoke to. It really made me think about why we consider selfies to be an example of vanity, and why young women are so afraid to be perceived as vain.

In my research for this paper, it was hard not to be reminded of the countless claims in the media that selfies foster narcissism, lead to mental health issues and even to loss of self-control, and how these claims represent the moral panic surrounding selfie culture (Senft and Baym, 2015: 1590-1592). Stanley Cohen defines a moral panic as something which is perceived as a "threat to societal values and interests" and tends to be presented to the public by the mass media which curates a threatening image of the phenomenon (Cohen 2002: 1). These moral panics tend to be directed towards the practices of young people, women, or people of colour (Senft and Baym, 2015: 1592). In discussion with informants, most stated that they associate selfies with women more than men, with some even claiming that taking selfies is deemed a more "feminine" activity. Due to this association between selfies and women, a moral panic has been created to lead people to believe that their minds will be corrupted by the narcissism of selfie-taking and posting, as seen in the previously mentioned claims from the media. Through targeting selfies, the media and panicked public can target women. Anne Burns argues that deeming selfies as narcissistic" is used to "chastise" selfie-takers, and in turn creates a "vicious cycle in which women are vain because they take selfies, and selfies connote vanity because women take them" (Senft and Baym, 2015: 1591). Essentially, it is way to assail women.

Therefore, women are stuck in a paradox: there is a pressure that exists for them to present themselves as physically attractive, while they are considered to be vain if they present their appearance through selfies. Interlocuters who told me they take selfies expressed that they use them as a method of self-presentation, especially throughout the selfie taking and posting process. Some told me that they either get ready to take a selfie or do so when they think they look good; they take a lot of pictures to get the "best" one; they may ask their friends for their opinion on which selfie to post. Some even post at a certain time, usually late evening, in order to reach more people. All of these practices reflect "highly managed" self-presentation online (Chalmers, 2013: 62). This shows that some interlocutors are using selfies as a tool to present a curated image of themselves to an online audience as they purposefully take "good" photos and post them to their Instagram profile for their followers to see. It is also clear that there is particular pressure on women to present themselves in an attractive way, with the importance of appearance being internalised in girls from a young age (Durvasula et al., 2005: 183), and the burden of the male gaze forcing women to meet certain beauty standards as set out by the patriarchy - expressed by John

Berger as: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." (Berger 1973: 47). This was reflected in discussions with my informants, as one suggested that "women are taught that their appearance is part of their identity, so they incorporate that into their presentation on Instagram". Others mentioned that women may make themselves look a certain way in selfies in order to cater to the male gaze or to receive male attention and validation. These internalised pressures on women emphasise the importance placed on an attractive physical appearance, subjecting young women to a cycle of pressure in which they must present themselves in a certain way online, and yet are perceived as vain when they do so.

I believe that this toxic relationship between women, selfies and vanity was explained particularly well by one interlocutor: women are not allowed to feel confident, so when they do, it is labelled as narcissism.

Conclusion

After years of posting selfies on Instagram myself, the question "why do we post selfies?" really intrigued me. This research has led me to an answer much more interesting and complex than "just because". Through my conversations with informants, I was able to explore the world of Instagram and the selfie culture that dominates it, allowing some great insights into how informants take, post, and interact with selfies. They also highlighted a common theme, the concern that one would be considered vain for posting a selfie – an anxiety that I have felt on many occasions myself. This led me to consider if selfies were an expression of vanity or narcissism, or not. Despite informants concerns over vanity, they all described motivations behind and interactions with selfies that indicated that selfies were in fact a social tool of communication. Through posting a selfie on Instagram, one can express their confidence, identity, or share important aspects of their life.

Although, it is important to note that this anxiety had not come from nowhere. As young women, my informants felt that women were pressured to present themselves as attractive, especially due to the pressure to look pretty being instilled in them from a young age. This has naturally led to a concern over appearance in many women, which could be manifested in the act of taking and posting selfies. However, the accusations of vanity and narcissism that come with the posting of selfies is a tool for misogyny. It is one that criticises women for feeling confident in their appearance and hoping to share that confidence in an online space. One can hope that this label of vanity can be dropped, and instead selfies can be appreciated as an expressive tool, much like regular photography.

ShapeWhen asked to define a selfie, many informants told me "it's just a picture of yourself", but it is very clear that there is more to it than that. For me and my interlocutors, selfies are expressive tools which allow us full autonomy to capture ourselves and moments of our lives, which can later be shared online if we wish to communicate these aspects of ourselves to a virtual audience. Like many other interests which are predominately taken up by women, selfies are much more complex than they are given credit for.

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Cover Photo: *https://www.tvtime.com/show/72164/episode/75564/comment/5666656*

Dundee Drag Goes Digital

Eilidh Gilmour

Abstract

During a period of lockdown in the UK in 2021 I conducted Ethnographic Encounters project on the culture within the Dundee Drag community. Over the course of the virtual interviews I conducted with four members of the community I began to get to grips with the unique nature of Drag in Dundee. This community has undergone a series of transformations as a result of the hit BBC reality show 'RuPaul's Drag Race UK' as well as the sudden shift from weekly physical performances to a solely inhabiting a digital space in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. This project considers how a performance-based culture may exist in a digital capacity.

The small run-down club was filled with a hub of chatter as groups of friends gathered at circular tables with their drinks, eagerly waiting for the drag show *Bingo Wigs* to begin. The atmosphere was instantly welcoming, even for me as a first-time attendee of a drag show. The night's performers, two queens – one from Dundee and one from Glasgow – circulated the tables that situated groups of friends, greeting them as they handed out bingo cards. My friend Max[1] and his boyfriend, who is himself a queen but was attending the night as an audience member, are both core members of the Dundee Drag Scene and had invited me along. This was the first time the *Bingo Wigs* show had left its usual Dundee-base to perform in Falkirk, yet it still attracted its loyal regulars who are as much a part of the show as the performers.

1. 1 It should be noted that all names have been changed for anonymity.

Along with many others, I first discovered drag through the popular reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. It was through this televised competition that I formed my first impression of what drag is, its culture and the skill of its competitive contestants. It was not until three years after my initial break into the binge-watching quality of the show that I first saw drag live at *Bingo Wigs*. The *Bingo Wigs* show – a play on the term Bingo wings meaning the fatty upper arms (of a woman) – centres around a game of bingo, embedded with a flurry of more scandalous innuendos and bounded together by a series of live drag performances. The title's playfulness showcases humour as an integral part of the drag performance, and ties to what Keith McNeal (1999:347) describes as a 'cathartic' critique on gender, as a derogatory term is transformed into light-hearted fun. The show has an in-house resident who is then accompanied by co-hosts and up-and-coming performers which allows for the integration of local and non-local queens, as well as being open to new members of the community. This has been the only live performance I have seen thus far due to the Covid-19 pandemic; my impression of Dundee's Drag Scene has been fleshed out through watching online performances, interviews with community members and through watching *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* season two.

Primarily, I interviewed four interlocutors: a cis-gendered man who regularly participates in the scene (Max), a cis-man drag queen (Strawberry Blonde), a cis-woman drag queen (Ginger Nut) and a transgender man who performs as a drag

king (River). These informative interviews took place over Zoom and were further fleshed out through online resources as recommended by my interlocutors such as their personal drag accounts on *Instagram* and performances they had posted on *YouTube*. In exploring the nature of the Dundee Drag scene, I have found points of reflection and interest in relation to wider anthropological theory such as the digital, gender studies and anthropology of the future. This will further exemplify the social structure of this idiosyncratic sub-culture inhabiting Dundee, with its unique inclusivity, hopes for the future post-*RPDR UK* and how it grapples with its newfound inhabitance of digital space.

The Structure and Status of Drag in Dundee

The Dundee Drag Scene established itself roughly six years ago and has grown quickly ever since. It is diverse in its nature and does not restrict its performers to the traditional drag queen role, as shown and expressed through the diversity of my interlocutors. Drag scenes particularly emerge in cities as they are home to an amalgamation of people from different backgrounds allowing for considerable nightlife and niche communities to emerge. Metropolitan cities, like that of Dundee, in their variegated and substantial size, allow for a range of inhabitants, and as a result, 'differentiation and specialization occurs' (Ulf Hannerz 1980:68). The structure of the drag community – made up of drag performers and regular attendees – appear to mimic the structure of the city they inhabit. Due to the small nature of Dundee, and its limited number of venues, the church that hosts the weekly *Bingo Wigs* show serves to centralise and unify the tight-knit community.

Dundee and its drag community possess much character yet are often overshadowed by the Edinburgh and Glasgow scenes, which are more renowned and tourist-driven. Moreover, the drag scene in Scotland itself is less well-known in comparison to its English counterparts, and as a result there is a lack of funding. As Lawrence Chaney, the first Scottish contestant on *RPDR* jokes in season two episode one, he is a well-established member of the Scottish drag scene, however, Scotland is often overlooked in this regard, and so he is probably unknown to the other British contestants (Images 1 & 2). This is likely in part due to the population difference between the two countries, with England being significantly larger. Strawberry Blonde speculates that a common payment for a drag show in Dundee is £20 as opposed to the roughly £200 payment for the English equivalent. This means that the queens who do drag as their occupation require immense talent and drive due to the lack of financial rewards. The rest of the funding is supplemented by tips from the audience. Lack of funding, from lack of visibility, potentially acts as another reason why Scottish drag is less well-known, forming a vicious cycle. As Max raised during our *Zoom* call, "Drag is about a 'wow' factor, [performers] constantly have to mix it up". The craft requires an investment of time and money in order to access the attire, wigs, and props that they need to continuously evolve as a performer. This suggests that the general lack of financial resources for

drag performers in Dundee inhibits their progress to achieve comparative noteablity.

(Images 1 & 2) Lawrence Chaney on BBC Three's 'RuPaul's Drag Race UK', Episode 1, Season 2 (BBC 2021)
Image 1 Text: 'and I'm Scottish drag royalty'
Image 2 Text: 'Which basically means that no one in England knows who I am.'

Roles within the Dundee Drag Community

Uniquely, at the Bingo Wigs shows there lacks a distinct divide between the roles of audience member and performer that is expected in the entertainment industry. There is no barrier between onstage and off, as performers and audience alike permeate each other's designated space. I witnessed this when attending my first show as, upon winning the round of Bingo, Max, an audience member, was invited to the stage to collect his winnings and to perform if he wished to do so. The inclusivity and stress placed on the importance of the audience themselves create an all-embracing safe space. The interlocutors described the community as "a big bubble" meaning there would be no motivation to create a hierarchy of 'us' and 'them', and as a result the social roles are relaxed and fluid.

The low set stage and absence of a backstage setting itself in the club did not enable the performers to establish a hierarchy over the audience members if they had wished to do so. There was no backstage, and so there was no illusionary entrance and exit off the stage. Further to this, the performers regularly walked into the sea of circular tables to mingle with audience members, making sure they were having a good time and taking pictures. It is a regular occurrence for audience members to attend *Bingo Wigs* dressed in drag, further blurring the role of performer and audience member. Richard Schechner (1988:265) proposes that performance and the mundane are separate events; that there is a distinct separation between onstage and off-stage. As a result of this strict categorisation, it does not allow room for the in-between, as demonstrated here, where the role of performer and audience member is blurred. Further to this, when considering Judith Butler's (1990) belief that gender is always a performance; the performance of gender does not fit into either the significant performance or the mundane. Drag resists the construction of gender as a binary and through observing its performance in Dundee, so too do the social roles of performer and audience resist binary categorisation. Drag is viewed as a more prominent or extravagant form of gender expression with its on stage platform and glamorous queens and kings, and so the everyday performance of gender that adheres to the traditional binary ideology is overlooked in its 'masculine' and 'feminine' forms. Butler (1990:175) poignantly states, '*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*', parodying of a gender, whether that be as a king or

a queen, infers that there is an original performance to be mimicked. The Dundee Drag Scene resists typical social constructs and refuses to be pigeon-holed, instead, *Bingo Wigs* creatively and inclusively entertains its audience.

Dundee Drag and the Digital

The Dundee Drag Scene existence in an online sphere has been emphasised by the recent Covid-19 pandemic which has caused in-person performances to be impossible and so the physical community has been transformed into a temporarily digital one. The digital as the only outlet for drag during the pandemic has caused an undeniable realisation of the role of the audience. Both Strawberry Blonde and River discussed the importance of atmosphere: cheering, singing-along, audience participation, all things inhibited in the digital without a live audience. River particularly points to the fact that the atmosphere of the show impacts how he chooses to perform as a king. For example, he describes the *Bingo Wigs* shows as playful, fun, and welcoming, whereas the Edinburgh show *Glamoor* he regularly attends is edgy, artistic and burlesque-inspired. For both shows his performance alters slightly to adhere to expectations from the audience and fit in with the atmosphere of the night. In this sense the audience gives them inspiration and within the realm of the digital this factor is removed. Further to this, when observing the performances online there is a distinct barrier between performer and audience member as the dynamic is translated as content creator and viewer. This suggests the online sphere – when sustained as the online means of performance – may impede some of the characterisitcs that makes the Dundee Drag community so distinct.

Social media has served to evolve the scene as an outlet of advertisement and as a platform to introduce new performers. For my interlocutor Ginger Nut, who began performing drag in 2019, the digital was her gateway into the scene. After watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* she decided to find the queens on social media, and from there was suggested local Scottish queens whom she reached out to through Instagram's direct messaging. Instagram appears to be the main platform for the queens and kings in Dundee suggesting that the visual is a main component of their drag due to Instagram being constructed around sharing pictures and videos. As River raised, "it is a good place to start building a portfolio", as its new feature IGTV allows for videos of performances to be attached to their profile. The platform can exercise the duality of drag being both artistic expression and to creating a brand for one's act. For example, Strawberry Blonde states that "make-up is a branding choice" as her upwards pointing pixie-like eyebrows are a conscious decision to set herself apart, a marketable identifier.

Drag performers can carefully construct their onstage persona and brand through self-managing a public social media platform. Social media here has a very professional purpose as a mode for advertising and networking, thus the construction of one's drag persona online is important. This is a new phenomenon in

which 'users actively participate in forms of impression management that were once the preserve of celebrities, politicians and others in the public eye.' (Deborah Chambers 2013:62-63). Further to this celebrity-like status, the performers often keep their personal account separate from their drag account. The divorce of the two personas means that their professional and private lives can be kept separate, however, primarily it allows for the drag account to be clear and concise in its self-promotion. This separation of the two selves is explored by Scott Ross (2019), in which he suggests separate public and private Instagram accounts are to cater to two different sets of social constraints and norms without obstructing likes, follows and comments. The professional side is adhering to the norms and taboos of drag, and through creating a separate personal account, non-drag related posting will not impede the popularity of the drag persona. The difficulties in translating the key dynamic between performer and audience in the online space suggests a that the current online-only drag scene is not suistainable despite it's usefulness as a tool for building one's brand and following.

RuPaul's Drag Race UK and the Future of Scottish Drag

RuPaul's Drag Race franchise broke into mainstream media with its US season that had both national and international success. This has resulted in more awareness and respect from those not previously aware of drag. For an etic admirer of the community like myself, the reality show granted access to the behind-the-scenes process of drag: the performance preparation, make-up, and often the creation of an outfit. As argued by Brennan and Gudelunas (2017:2) 'RPDR has served to propel drag culture from the obscurity of the gay bar/club scene to the mainstream of reality television'. An example of its benefits to the drag community was raised by Ginger Nut; the show answers questions for newcomers without having to approach a member of the scene themselves. This is especially useful for some of the invasive or uncomfortable questions, such as the notorious 'tucked' question. At the very least it provides the show's audience a starting point from which they can research drag performing or even find the digital side themselves. Thus, *RPDR* destigmatises the scene as it introduces drag into mainstream media. The presentation of the artistic process behind drag, as opposed to live performances where only the end product results in a new level of understanding and respect from the audience. Strawberry Blonde raised that the show, "brings drag into the house": it is brought to its audience instead of its audience proactively searching for the scene in person, permeating the threshold of the home. Drag Race gives a platform to the world of drag and the LGBTQI+ community that has otherwise been marginalised. However, it possesses a somewhat restrictive quality in that it is a competition for drag queens only. Without my attendance at *Bingo Wigs* and being friends with members of the scene, I would not be aware of drag kings and cisgender woman drag queens.

In the most recent series of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* which began airing in January 2021 – spoiler alert – two of the four

finalists were Scottish queens, with one being from the Dundee Scene herself, and the winner being from the Glasgow Scene. This is the first of any Drag Race show with Scottish contestants, meaning that the winner being Scottish caused quite the cultural wave for the interlocutors. The lack of Scottish representation in the franchise appears to be a contributing factor to the disparity in funding as the first season of *RPDR UK* particularly transformed the English Drag Scene in 2019, multiplying its audience. Now, there is expected to be a distinct growth in the Scottish Drag Scene as it can now assert its status with the Scottish finalists being two new household names. This has resulted in a common feeling of hope expressed by all four interlocutors for the future of the scene; particularly the hope of more funding as there is a new audience that may wish to see the venues in which Ellie Diamond and Lawrence Chaney performed. Many of my friends outside of the drag community have started watching *RPDR UK* this year to cheer on the Scottish contestants and now wish to see live performances. The success of this UK spin-off of the Drag Race franchise – in its ability to showcase more culture-specific drag in its humour, slang, cultural references etc – has meant other national versions popping up such as *Drag Race Holland* and *RuPaul's Drag Race Down-Under*. The united feeling of hope maintains the strong bond between the members of the Dundee drag community acting as a light at the end of the tunnel that is the Covid-19 pandemic. As argued by Bryant and Knight (2019:134), hope is 'a form of futural momentum, a way of pressing into the future that attempts to pull certain potentialities into actuality.' This focus of the potential success of the future coincides with the natural future-orientated community who consistently pursue creative endeavours in the hope to evolve. The future, therefore, is a constant of the present in the community. However, there is also a sense of urgency to materialise these hopes within this limited attention as Max, Strawberry Blonde and Forrest all expressed concern that the hype from the most recent season of RPDR UK will die down before nightlife can return to its physical performances post-pandemic (Bryant and Knight 2019:157).

Conclusion

Through the course of this study of the nature of the Dundee Drag Scene I have observed the ways in which the character of this community within Scottish drag has been impacted by the city it inhabits, the progressively popular *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise and the translation of drag into an online sphere. *Bingo Wigs* crafts itself to primarily function as a social space highlighted in its interactive premise – a game of bingo –, the importance of audience members in creating an atmosphere as well as the non-hierarchal relationship between performers and attendees. Its inclusivity, as shown through the diverse roles of my interlocutors and sustained regular occurrence, creates a safe, stable space for the audience to have fun, socialise and potentially win a game of bingo. The drag scene in Dundee is suspected to be up-in-coming in the wake of *RPDR UK*'s second season, uniting community members in a time-space of hope. If the expected influx of new audience members come to fruition, it will

likely impact the structure and roles within the community. However, the fluid and inclusive nature of the Dundee Drag Scene will likely welcome the change and take it in their stride.

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From the Outside In: Veganism, Identity Communication, and Resisting Carnism

Evelyn Hoon

Abstract

Veganism is a philosophy and lifestyle which rejects the consumption of animal products and calls for an end to animal exploitation. This article is an ethnographic exploration of how vegans internally comprehend and externally communicate vegan identity. Ethnographic data is drawn from a mosaic of personal reflections, virtual engagement with university-aged vegans, and observation of online vegan spaces. This data demonstrates that veganism and vegan identity are, at their core, a rejection of carnism: the social norm of accepting animal exploitation. Using psychological and linguistic approaches, I describe vegan identity as performative— vegans use behaviour and language used to identify themselves as vegan amongst peers and in public spaces. Through an ethnographic approach, I argue that the invisible dominant ideology of carnism rules both the minds of omnivores who accept it, and the behaviour and identities of vegans who fight it, particularly in online spaces. Both vegan identities and vegans' interactions with omnivores are shaped by defiance of carnism.

> "It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being… the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?"
> Jeremy Bentham (1789:245)

In September 2020, down a rabbit hole on the internet, I was forced to recognise that I was undoubtedly a hypocrite. My whole life I'd preached love for animals and the planet, volunteering at rescues and marching for the climate. Yet, every morning, I drank my tea with dairy milk. Down the rabbit hole, I discovered to my horror that that dairy cows, constantly impregnated to continue producing milk, are killed brutally before 5 years old (out of a 20-year life span), that male chicks born to the egg industry are macerated alive the day they hatch, and that pregnant pigs are kept immobile in their own excrement for the duration of forced pregnancies (Animal Equality 2014). Additionally, animal agriculture produces more greenhouse gasses than the entire transportation sector, and is a leading cause of deforestation, biodiversity loss, and water pollution (Machovina 2015:424-427). Sat in bed watching footage of factory farms, I recognised the hard truth— that to continue calling myself an animal lover and environmentalist, I had to change.

Veganism is a philosophy and lifestyle that rejects the consumption of animal

products and calls for an end to animal exploitation. I went vegan in September 2020 and was immediately granted access to a new and exclusive social group. Encouraged by my vegan peers, I set out to share my great new glowing wisdom with others. Yet, I feared how non-vegans would see me and veganism in extension. I questioned if I was a good vegan, and if non-vegans found me irritating. Almost two years later, "vegan" is now a cemented part of my identity and impacts how I relate to those around me. Still, my old fears and questions about vegan identity remain. I have chosen to explore them here.

In this article, I write both as a passionate vegan and as an ethnographer interested in my own community. I draw my ethnographic data from a mosaic of personal reflections and virtual engagement with vegan peers (participants) and online vegan spaces. From this data, I conclude that veganism is, at its core, a rejection of carnism: the invisible dominant ideology justifying animal exploitation. Vegans perform their opposition to carnism through role performance and language use, both online and in real-life interactions. This identity performance can be seen clearly within vegan-only spaces, and in interactions with non-vegans. Using an ethnographic approach, I argue that the invisible dominant ideology of carnism rules both the minds of omnivores persuaded by it, and the behaviour and identities of vegans who seek to fight it.

Reasons and Terminology: What is Veganism Anyway

'Veganism' denotes a form of personal ethical commitment reflected in one's lifestyle. Veganism is popularly defined as When introducing 'veganism' to non-vegan peers, this is a preferable and approachable definition to use, as evidenced in my ethnographic fieldwork. Ethical convictions differentiate 'vegan'

> "a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude- as far as is *possible and practicable*- all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing, or any other purpose"
> The Vegan Society, 1979

from 'plant-based'; vegan is "for the animals" (a participant Luke's words), while 'plant-based' is a diet free from animal products but not motivated ethically. There are strong motivations behind the decision to become vegan, including the benefit to the environment, benefit to personal health, and fierce opposition to animal exploitation.

Ethnographic Data

It's a Friday evening, and my phone is buzzing. The group chat vegan supremacy (a Facebook chat for a small collection of vegans at the University of St Andrews) is active[1]. Charlotte, Henry, and Jesse share images of the dinners they've just cooked, and Jon, Eric, Anna, and Blake are discussing the latest Earthling Ed video[2]. I receive a response from Kiera[3], one of my participants, on when we can video chat. I stand over a sizzling pan of tofu,

1. All names of members of this group chat have been altered for privacy.
2. Earthling Ed: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVRr-GAcUc7cblUzOhI1KfFg
3. Names of participants have, with consent, not been altered, but only first names are provided.

glancing at my phone every few minutes, pondering how veganism has altered my social life.

I was welcomed into the unique social world of veganism quickly and had no issue finding fellow vegans interested in discussing the topic. Kiera, with whom I attended school years ago, has been vegan since August 2019. Luke, an acquaintance from *vegan supremacy,* has been vegan since October 2020. Finally, I chose to speak with a long-time friend Daniela, who was vegan for three years but has been an 'omni' (vegan shorthand for meat-eater, commonly used online) for two years since. I also spoke at length with several other vegans, but have chosen to focus on these three conversations, as they felt the most in-depth and applicable.

The social world of veganism takes place largely online. Many vegans make their vegan identity known on social media platforms, and it was only through these "public displays of veganism" (Daniela's words) that I found my participants. I had not spoken to Kiera in six years but knew she was vegan because of her occasional posts about animal rights and vegan snacks. Luke posts at length about the horrors of factory farming and is an active member of *vegan supremacy*. While a vegan, Daniela had posted about vegan cooking regularly. Online spaces are central to the social life of vegans I spoke to— the importance of online vegan identity will be explored in more depth later in this ethnography.

All conversations with participants took place virtually through video calls on social media platforms. Beyond these virtual discussions, I spent time in online vegan spaces, so will also mention the *vegan supremacy* group and other platforms like r/vegan on Reddit. A full ethnography could be written about these spaces alone; I include them as a supplement where relevant to my discussion. This exploration of veganism/meat-eating focuses only on a Euro-American context, and the definitions and relations described in this article are only applicable to that setting.

It would be impossible to disconnect myself from the process, and so have chosen to include a significant amount of auto-ethnography, defined by Ellis et al as "to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (2011:273). In other words, I will include and reflect upon my experiences of veganism to understand the broader meanings of 'vegan' and 'vegan identity'.

Carnism: Veganism as a Challenge to the Norm

A vegan identity would not exist without social norms to the contrary. Carnism, a term coined by sociologist Melanie Joy, refers to the invisible belief system or ideology of a society that applies empathy asymmetrically to animals (2010:30). In a carnist society, dogs are given love and kindness while pigs in factory farms are kept in small pens then sent to CO2 chambers to become bacon. This unexamined difference between precious pet and food exists and is justified for no reason apart from 'that's just how things are' (Melanie Joy, 2010:27). This is the product of a carnist society, in which the

exploitation and eating of certain animals is deemed normal and appropriate. Carnists, as Joy terms meat-eaters (this is where the vegan insult 'carnie' originates), eat meat because it is what is normal, and this 'normal' is not often challenged (Melanie Joy, 2010:30). Eating a vegan diet is seen as coupled with one's disposition, while the same is never said about meat-eating. Even the term 'meat-eating' is an action, divorced from belief or personality (unlike 'vegan') (Melanie Joy, 2010:29).

I will return to the theme of carnism later, but now turn to how vegan identity is formed in online spaces and in-person interactions with omnivores.

Vegan as a Social label

Vegans are a magnet for attention. Ex-vegan Daniela commented wryly, "you will stick out like a sore thumb". By accepting the term 'vegan' as part of one's social identification, one must decide what it means to be vegan, and how (or whether) to let this guide interactions.

All my participants, and the vegans I know personally outside of this project, seem acutely aware of how this label is viewed by others. It's clear why: the common stereotypes that 'the first thing a vegan tells you is that they are vegan', or that vegans are 'judgemental' and 'holier-than-thou', pervades common narratives[4]. Headlines like "Militant Vegans are Out of Control" in *The Independent* are not uncommon. Vegans are often portrayed as either illogical hippies or aggressive, judgemental, and dangerous— either way, there is something not right with them. This reality is embraced by some: 2022 bestseller *This Is Vegan Propaganda (And Other Lies the Meat Industry Tells You)* by popular vegan advocate Ed Winters (Earthling Ed) is a long-form discussion of the issue[5].

It is not apparent whether many non-vegans think of vegans in this negative way or if vegans just fear they do. Nonetheless, these narratives influence the way vegans like me, Luke, and Kiera carry out social interactions. Many vegans seem to feel obligated to represent veganism in a good light— in a conversation with Kiera, we exasperatedly agree on the pressure of self-constraint. When eating alongside non-vegans, we sit stiff lipped while friends express how good the meat tastes. Fielding questions from intrigued acquaintances, we shy away, and at times, uncomfortably repeat the phrase "I'm not one of those vegans".

The constant negative stigma around the 'vegan' label can be tiring and restricting. Kiera expressed frustratedly to me, "I'm always afraid of making it my whole identity, like, I feel like people would just think I'm annoying!!". Daniela told me a large reason why she gave up veganism was the social pressure of always being 'the vegan girl'.

> "It was exhausting. I felt like I had to adopt the identity of a vegan and I became the 'vegan spokesperson' every time I went anywhere. I didn't realise it at the time, but it really affected me" -Daniela

4. Vegan (mis)representation in media: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDnfsgttuK4

5. This Is Vegan Propaganda (And Other Lies the Meat Industry Tells You): https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/144/1444658/this-is-vegan-propaganda/9781785043765.html

Vegans adopt the label for a reason, though. Identifying with the label implies an intentionally defiant and deeply involved moral stance. I chose to focus on veganism for this project, in part, because a friend remarked on my "constant comments about animal agriculture" and told me to find a new "victim" (*"but the only victims are the animals!"*). I did not share vegan ideas to pass judgement. I wanted my loved ones to know the truth about animal agriculture. As Luke told me enthusiastically, "I feel like when you go vegan you want to tell everybody about it. I haven't had the opportunity yet because of lockdown, as soon as I'm released out into the wild, I'll be like, *mental*". Good intentions can only go so far, though: vegan identity is polarising, and vegans' communication with non-vegans can be fraught.

Identity and Role Performance: Psychological Reflections

Throughout my conversations with participants and vegan friends, the term identity cropped up constantly. To understand what 'vegan identity' means, and how it relates to broader non-vegan society, it will help to understand what identity means in the first place. Two related theories of identity can be applied in veganism's case: psychological theory and linguistic theory. I apply these theories to vegan identity within vegan groups (internally) and to vegan identity in vegan X non-vegan relations (externally). I begin the discussion of identity with Burke and Reitz's psychological theory of identity.

Burke and Reitz suggest an understanding of identity centred on "meanings one attributes to oneself in a role" (1981:84). These meanings are defined as social products created and maintained by social interactions, which are symbolic and reflexive, and organised to create a concept of self (Burke and Reitz, 1981:84). In other words, identity is a socially constituted sense of self. This approach to identity is part of a broader view of identity as performative behaviour. Role performance is how an individual performs or expresses their identity around others (Burke and Reitz, 1981: 85). The performer asks their audience to take this performance seriously and recognise the intended identity being portrayed (Goffman 1956:10-20).

In internal vegan circles, vegans perform vegan identity by providing indications of their genuine vegan-ness through language, tone, expression, and evidence, like pictures of meals or unique memes. This performance asserts its difference from a non-vegan alternative. In v*egan supremacy*, I found myself providing recipes alongside rants about carnism: the space is given wholly to veganism, and all other identities are secondary. In online spaces with anonymity like r/vegan, I found identity performance to be even more dramatic or involved. In these spaces, group participants' online personas were entirely about veganism, with other personal traits hardly acknowledged. This performance of vegan identity is ubiquitous in vegan spaces: vegan 'culture' is concerned with animal liberation, vegan food, and debating carnists, so identity performances in

vegan spaces reflect these interests.

Conversations with my participants suggest that outside of vegan circles (external) is understood as the most important site of vegan role performance. Vegans interacting with non-vegans must act the part, voicing the tenants of veganism but avoiding offence. Challenging carnism is important to many vegans, but the defiance of social norms can make veganism an incredibly isolating identity (noted by all participants). Daniela described an experience of "scary in-group out-group" dynamics. Luke, the nephew and cousin of dairy farmers, vets, and jockeys, voiced anxiety about bridging the seemingly insurmountable gap between veganism and his family's "intensely different" worldview. The choice to take on and perform the identity of veganism, when so opposed to the likes of Luke's family's, is the cause of this isolated feeling. Veganism, both as an ideology and identity, stands defiantly against and distanced from carnism. The role performances linked to these opposing worldviews are accordingly divergent, and the people who embody them notice.

Identity and Role Performance: Linguistic Reflections

The psychological approach, which mentions language in its theorising, can be supplemented by a direct focus on linguistics. In linguistic anthropology, the term identity can refer to membership in social groups or categories *created through* language (Kroskrity 1999:111). Language and communication are involved not only in the creation of a community, but also in the definition of that group by outsiders. In a contemporary, fast-paced world, linguistic appeal to groups is more common than ever (Kroskrity 1999 :112). Passing moments of conversation mean that identity is created rapidly and strategically to fit a scenario.

Language is used to create and display identity within vegan circles (internally). For instance, many vegans share vernacular and colloquialisms. Some common examples include 'earthlings' (a term for all human and non-human animals), 'veeganator' (a vegan on a mission to 'convert'), insults like 'omni', 'meat/cheese-breath', or 'carnie', and words for unique vegan ingredients like 'aquafaba' (chickpea water) or 'nooch' (nutritional yeast). This insider language is shared between vegans and was present in my participant conversations. My observations indicate that this language is popularised and circulated in online spaces where an entire group identifies as vegan. In the U.S. and U.K., vegans are a small minority. In contrast, online vegan groups are populated only by those who identify as a vegan. This all-vegan setting allows for the creation and spread of vegan identity-linked language. To put it simply, this language is vegans performing their vegan-ness to other vegans: internal identity performance. Language like this was most often employed in online groups like *vegan supremacy*, and even more so on r/vegan.

Beyond the 'inner circle' of veganism, language is important for how vegans portray themselves and are portrayed by non-vegans. Vegans, like those in

vegan supremacy or on r/vegan, arm themselves for verbal battle with shared arguments. These can be sourced from personal reflection, from vegan creators like *Earthling Ed*[6] or *ComicSkeptic*[7], or from websites like *Your Vegan Fallacy*[8]. Those looking to avoid conflict will learn to deflect questions, and echo repeatedly that veganism is "not a big deal" (Kiera). Meanwhile, vegans and veganism are (re-) constituted in media representation, online dialogue, and individual non-vegans' perceptions.

Carnism Revisited: Interacting with the Non-Vegan Other

Despite the claim that veganism is "not a big deal", all vegans I spoke to and know seem to be actively interested in challenging carnism. Debating non-vegans is commonly considered a core tenant of veganism. Luke voiced that vegan identity means a responsibility to challenge the cognitive dissonance (a term referring to supposed love of animals whilst paying for animal exploitation) of family or peers[9]. Kiera recounted a story,

'A friend came over, and I have a bunch of cow pictures on my wall, and my friend was like "aw they're so cute" and I was straight up like, "why'd you eat beef last night then?". She just went silent… but I had to say it'
-Kiera

Challenges to cognitive dissonance provoke varying responses. Luke became vegan when a friend challenged him to think more deeply about his eating a piece of chicken— and now he is one of the most outspoken vegans I know. This is a rare story; most attempts are met with avoidance or anger. Yet, just by being vegan and choosing to identify with the label, vegans resist carnism constantly. Every day a vegan must choose to eat an a-typical diet, resist social pressure from non-vegans, and reaffirm their belief in the justness of veganism. As Luke noted,

"With other [controversial] stuff, people will take criticism better when it's not their lifestyle, it's not what they're actively engaged in… eating animals is an ideology, it's just the dominant one[1]. But I'm proud it's one I'm denying" -Luke

1. I would clarify Luke's statement— eating animals is an invisible dominant ideology

The challenge veganism poses to carnism is at the root of the negative stigma around veganism. Vegans threaten to upset the comfortable carnist status quo, so they are ridiculed in media4 and treated in person with puzzlement or irritation. Indeed, MacInnis and Hodson (2015:726) found that vegans are perceived the same or more negatively than common prejudice target identities such as LGBTQ+ and Muslim; only drug addicts were evaluated more negatively than vegans.

The vegans I know do not seem to be phased, though— there is a spirit of resistance and resilience in veganism. Despite the difficulties with his family noted above, Luke grins when we discuss debating carnism with non-vegans. In

6. *Earthling Ed: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVRrGA-cUc7cblUzOhI1KfFg*
7. ComicSkeptic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcV-R2OVxPYw
8. *Your Vegan Fallacy: https://yourveganfallacyis.com/en*
9. Cognitive dissonance explained by CosmicSkeptic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnykmsDetNo

the vegan supremacy group chat, the group frequently deconstruct comments with carnist fallacies with relish despite the uphill battle they face. On r/vegan, commenters rally around success and debate stories. In vegan spaces both on and offline, vegan solidarity thrives. For me, veganism has given me new strength—the motivation of doing something good beyond myself. To save animals and limit my environmental footprint has given me the willpower to change my diet, to convert my parents and partner, and to reflect on the voiceless suffering of animals every day. By resisting carnism, vegans offer the world defiance, and in turn their community gives them strength.

"I love talking to other vegans because I care so much about this. Around all my non-vegan friends I have to like, tamp it down, but it's like, I LOVE IT, it's a facet of my identity that I love and wanna [sic] talk about because it feels like just by living my life, I'm doing something good" -Kiera

Vegan Unity as a Dream for the Future

The dream of veganism is alive and well. Vegan communities, online and in-person, flourish and grow larger every year. *Vegan supremacy* grows every semester as more students turn to a vegan diet. Some estimates suggest veganism saw a 40% increase in 2020 in Britain (Anthony 2021). Internet campaigns like Veganuary (going vegan for January) break new records every year (Anthony 2021), and Earthling Ed's YouTube videos frequently hit over a million views10. Speaking with Kiera, Luke, and other vegans only reaffirmed my love and confidence in veganism. Kiera expressed her joy at getting to discuss the subject:

Being a vegan can be lonely, but the vegan community is resilient and welcoming. In each of my participant interviews, I asked the same question; "Is the future vegan?".

Luke: "I think so. At some point, whether it's acceptable to kill animals will become a political question, and that can't come soon enough".

Daniela: "I'll be vegetarian or vegan again at some point in my life. And I really do hope that eventually, someday, everyone in the world is vegan".

Kiera: "H*LL YEAH IT IS"!

Drawing Conclusions

Through speaking with Kiera, Luke, and Daniela, and engaging with other vegans online and in my life, I have grown to understand the community and the meaning of 'vegan' at a deeper level. Veganism is concerned with creating a more just world— one where animals and the environment are protected, and carnism no longer rules without question. Through my research, I found the identity connected to this vision as best understood through anthropological and psychological lenses. Language and role performance within vegan circles and in external dialogues decide what 'vegan identity' is. This identity is amplified in online vegan spaces, creating cemented vegan identity and vernacular. The challenge veganism poses to carnism and the status quo means vegans are often demonised, but many vegans embrace this with defiance. Despite fighting an uphill battle, the vegan community remains

resilient, and I hope, like Kiera, Luke, and Daniela, to see veganism gain popularity and respect for the sake of the billions of animals suffering, this very moment, at human hands.

Reflecting on the time spent with my participants, I now see veganism as shaped not only by its formal definition but by collective meanings co-created in vegan spaces. As we act out our vegan identities, we shape the future of the community and the movement. We share not only an ethical conviction, but a culture and identity that passionately challenges dominant carnist society. Carnism may live the minds of both omnivores and vegans, but vegan identity grants confidence to reject it.

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For the cover image, an editorial shot of a digital art exhibit in Japan was chosen to represent this issue’s digital research methods theme. It shows the connections and contortions of the methods unique to anthropological research conducted virtually.