Journal of Undergraduate Research in Anthropology

Volume IX
Fall 2025



Journal of Undergraduate Research in Anthropology
Volume IX, 2025

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From the Editors

Welcome!

Since its inception (2017), JURA has been the chosen forum for 66 undergraduate students representing twenty-one different universities and colleges.

Submissions have been both multidisciplinary and geographically broad in scope with contributions that pertain to theory, archaeology, biological, linguistic, technological, and cultural concerns.

Submitted articles are part of an external peer-review process, with each submission reviewed by an anonymous reviewer. We thank those reviewers for their contributions.

We hope you enjoy the contributions in this volume.

Eric Bowne and Jonathan Berkshire

Information for Authors

Articles should not exceed 10,000 words in length, including references. Papers will follow JURA style guide.

For review, please submit to ebowne@uca.edu

- a PDF file of the complete submission
- OR a Word file containing the complete paper (i.e., including abstract, tables and figures)
- OR a Word file containing the text, references, table and figure captions, plus an individual file of each figure (600 dpi) and/or table.
- Excel file of tables is preferred.

Vol. IX, 2025 Editors

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A Border Without Rights: The Rise of Digital Surveillance at the U.S.-Mexico Border

Margaret Sampson-Green, *Hendrix College*

Abstract

The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) and surveillance technologies at the U.S.-Mexico border has transformed the landscape of migration governance, raising profound human rights concerns. This paper examines the impact of these technologies on migrants' rights, highlighting how they reinforce racial discrimination, invade privacy, and undermine asylum protections. Drawing on insights from Petra Molnar's *The Walls Have Eyes*, and buttressed by other theoretical frameworks and recent studies on digital border governance, the paper argues that technologies like predictive analytics, biometrics, and autonomous surveillance systems exacerbate the dangers faced by migrants while embedding structural biases into border enforcement. It also explores the implications of recent U.S. policy changes, including such as the Trump administration's expanded use of AI for surveillance and data collection. In response, the paper proposes a set of policy solutions, including the creation of independent oversight bodies, enhanced transparency, and international cooperation to ensure that technological tools do not become instruments of exclusion and harm. Ultimately, the paper calls for a reimagining of border technologies to prioritize human rights and dignity in the digital age.

Introduction

On a scorching summer day in the Sonoran Desert, Elias Alvarado — a Venezuelan man in his thirties seeking work to support his family — collapsed just three miles from a major highway that could have led him to safety (Molnar 2024: Chap. 1). He died alone, dehydrated and exhausted, not because he was lost, but because increasingly sophisticated U.S. border surveillance technologies had pushed him into ever more dangerous terrain (Molnar 2024: Chap. 1). Alvarado's tragic death is not an isolated event — it is emblematic of a growing humanitarian crisis at the intersection of migration, surveillance, and artificial intelligence.

As digital technologies become embedded in border enforcement regimes, they are not merely tools for monitoring movement: they are instruments of exclusion. Under the guise of enhancing national security, the U.S. government has implemented surveillance towers, drones, facial recognition software, predictive algorithms, and even robo-dogs across the U.S.-Mexico border. These technologies, developed in many cases by private corporations, operate with minimal oversight and in ways that disproportionately harm racialized, impoverished, and vulnerable migrants. Far from being neutral, such systems promote structural inequalities, xenophobic narratives, and actively undermine international human rights law.

This paper examines how artificial intelligence and digital surveillance technologies have reshaped border enforcement in the U.S., transforming migration governance in ways that endanger lives and violate human rights. Insights from Petra Molnar's *The Walls Have Eyes*, international legal frameworks, other theoretical perspectives, and recent policy developments, contribute to an understanding of how emerging technologies contribute to racial profiling, limit asylum access, and criminalize mobility itself.

Part I: Technology and Artificial Intelligence at the U.S.-Mexico Border

While technology has given people the connectivity of the Internet, artificial intelligence, and smartphones, it has also laid the groundwork for a humanitarian crisis at international borders. In the name of national security, many countries, including the United States, use "smart borders" surveillance technologies to manage and control who is allowed to cross international boundaries (Molnar 2021). As the UN Special Rapporteur E. Tendayi Achiume told the Human Rights Council, such technologies are "deployed to advance the xenophobic and racially discriminatory treatment and exclusion of migrants, refugees, and stateless persons" (United Nations 2021a). The increased use of technology to enforce the U.S.-Mexico border has led to a rise in the violation of migrants' human rights through racial discrimination, loss of privacy rights, inequality, and denial of the right to seek asylum (Amnesty International 2023, 11).

Use of technology at the border is not new, but surveillance and other new technologies are increasingly sophisticated (Amelung and Galis 2023, 324; Ahmed and Tondo 2021; Phippen 2021). Predictive analytics allows immigration officials to collect identifying information to make predictions about the behavior of migrants (Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies 2021,

130). Biometrics, such as fingerprints, retinal scans, facial recognition, and technologies with the ability to "recognize a person's vein and blood vessel patterns, ear shape, and gait" are also being used (Molnar 2024, Introduction). Even newer is the introduction of polygraph tests and "voice-printing technologies [which] analyze accents and patterns of speech" (Molnar 2024, Introduction). More recently, emotion recognition systems have been introduced (Rinaldi and Teo 2025, 62). These emerging technologies threaten the human rights of migrants and have doubled the number of their deaths in the Arizona desert (Chambers et al. 2019; De León 2015). Unsurprisingly, there are very few oversight mechanisms or guidance governing the use of surveillance and other emerging technologies at the border. Additionally, technology perpetuates and gives validity to the idea of "us" versus "them" or "who deserves to be safe and who is a threat" (Molnar 2024, Introduction).

The impacts of surveillance and emerging technologies on people crossing the border is often overlooked. In *The Walls Have Eyes: Surviving Migration in the Age of Artificial Intelligence,* lawyer and anthropologist Petra Molnar provides an ethnography of the lives of people who have crossed borders (Molnar 2024). These stories include those who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as borders within Europe, East Africa, and Israel (Molnar 2024). At the U.S.-Mexico border, Molnar follows James Holeman, the founder of Battalion Search and Rescue, a group of volunteers who search the Sonora for people who have survived, and those who have not, while crossing the desert (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). One of the people who did not survive the desert was Elias Alvarado, who died only three miles from a major highway which would have led him to Gila Bend, Arizona (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1).

While crossing the U.S.-Mexico border undetected is inherently dangerous, the journey is made even more treacherous by "smart borders" as migrants like Alvarado are forced to take more circuitous routes, often through hostile terrain. This phenomenon can be traced back to the U.S. Border Patrol's 1994 strategic doctrine of "prevention through deterrence" (Chambers and Soto 2025, 1). This plan aimed to disrupt sites of traditional entry and smuggling routes, with the intention of forcing migrants into "more hostile terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement" (Chamber and Soto 2025, 1). Molnar describes a meeting with Samuel Chambers and Geoffrey Boyce, who study border walls and technology (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). Chambers showed Molnar a map of surveillance towers in the Sonora, also covering the Tohono O'odham Nation's land, which are "part of an expanding 'network of fifty-five towers equipped with cameras, heat sensors, motion sensors, radar systems, and a GPS system'" (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). This network of Integrated Fixed Towers (IFTs) is "arguably most responsible then for corralling [Undocumented Border Crossers] into danger in deeper tracts of wilderness relative to other border enforcement infrastructure" (Chambers and Soto 2025, 2). These surveillance systems are the product of an Israeli company, Elbit Systems (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). The American branch of Elbit Systems boasts that they "handle the data, so agents can virtually be anywhere along the U.S. borders" (Elbit America n.d.). Elbit's website also quotes a recent headline which boasts that Elbit America is "One of the 2025 World's Most Ethical Companies for the Fourth Year in a Row" (Hartley 2025). Rescue beacons in the Sonora may have water, but they also have motion detectors which alert Border Patrol of movement (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). In the sky, there are drones equipped with sensors to alert border patrol of people crossing in the Sonora (Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies 2021, 126). The U.S. uses "radar-equipped aerostat blimps operating from 15,000 feet (4,500 meters) in the air, and the aptly named Predator B drone, enabled with video and radar sensors" (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). Before the Predator B was the MQ-1 Predator which was initially developed and used by the U.S. military in the Balkan wars in the 1990s (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). The Predator drones are able to fly for longer periods of time and are able to operate in challenging weather conditions, however they are more difficult to operate and have been known to crash (Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies 2021, 131; Ghaffary 2019). At the U.S.-Mexico border surveillance drones are used alongside "inland surveillance, comprising technologies such as remote license plate readers, facial recognition cameras at checkpoints along the highways, and various fiber-optic sensor systems" (Molnar 2024, Chap.1). Drones are "sanctioned within a 100-mile (161-kilometer) border zone," suggesting that citizens may also be subject to monitoring by drones intended to monitor migrants (Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies 2021, 132). These technologies allow for monitoring of migrants far beyond the traditionally monitored physical borders of a state (Rinaldi and Teo 2025, 68). Technology is not the only threat to those crossing the border. Armed far-right vigilante groups have become increasingly active in the borderlands of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas (Owen 2024).

Surveillance and artificial intelligence technologies have continued to develop over the past few years. In 2022, it was unveiled that "robo-dogs" would be used along the U.S.-Mexico border (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2022). These robo-dogs have been used by the U.S.

military, and James Holeman, one of the search and rescue volunteers, observed that, "[T]he idea that these machines are going to be running around the desert hunting people is so dark" (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). Molnar worries about, "a not-so-distant future in which people like Elias Alvarado will be pursued by high-speed, military-grade technology designed to kill" (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1).

The increasing use of technology at the borders contributes to the continued criminalization of migration. The term "crimmigration" equates "human movement with criminality, [where] the starting point becomes the need to control, prevent, and even remove those who are crossing borders because they are presupposed to be criminal unless proven otherwise" (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). Juliet Stumpf, a law professor at Lewis and Clark Law School, notes that the purpose of "crimmigration" is to exclude outsiders who are "deemed criminally alien" (Stumpf, 2006, 378). García Hernández, a law professor at Ohio State University, points out that, "It is not a coincidence that immigration law grew more criminalized just as the U.S. closed off more legal pathways for Mexicans to immigrate legally; we can look at crimmigration from a racialized viewpoint in the present context… There are people from Canada, Australia, and Western Europe who come here legally and then overstay their visas. But when you look at the ICE statistics, the people who are locked up and deported for visa overstays are overwhelmingly Latin American" (Reyes 2021). As of January 2020, the U.S. government expanded the collection of DNA samples from migrants, both adults and children, in ICE custody and add them to the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS), which is managed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1; Bhuiyan 2025). The Department of Justice justified this regulation as promoting "justice and public safety" by enabling the government to identify and link immigrants to crimes, and cited the example of the Railroad Killer, a serial killer who committed murders on both sides of the border before being caught and executed in Texas (U.S. Department of Justice 2020). However, copious evidence shows that far more crimes are committed by U.S. citizens than by migrants (Abramitzky et al. 2024; Boyke and Iniguez 2024; Soto 2024).

It is not just the DNA of migrants that is of interest to the U.S. government. The government also monitors calls, video chats, voice mail messages, photo sharing, and text messages (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). Since April 2019, the U.S. State Department has demanded that visa applicants provide their social media account information (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1). The government uses social media to support their racist assumptions and to exclude those with undesirable ideological and political opinions (Molnar 2024, Chap. 1; Levinson-Waldman and Balkam 2025). For example, as of April 9, 2025, DHS screens social media belonging to international students and immigrants for antisemitic activity, including support for Palestine, and is authorized to use that information "when adjudicating immigration benefit requests" (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2025; Amnesty International 2025).

The predictive artificial intelligence (AI) models on which border patrol have increasingly relied also perpetuates racialized and xenophobic stereotypes. Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology* explores the ways in which racism and technology intersect (Benjamin 2019). For example, technology and other forms of predictive AI most often misidentify faces belonging to people of color, with Black women "substantially less likely" to be correctly identified" (Findley 2020). The CBP One app relied on such faulty facial recognition (Graham 2025). Verónica Martinez of the Migration and Technology Monitor, investigated how CBP One changed the asylum process, finding that it was ineffective in decreasing the number of illegal entries (Miller 2024). Furthermore, the app was largely inaccessible: "Now access to the internet and power sources are essential for people on the move, and sometimes that is put before other needs like health and shelter" (Miller 2024). Studies have also found that the facial recognition used by the CBP One app does not recognize darker skin tones in migrants' uploaded photographs, and therefore effectively barred many migrants from seeking asylum in the United States (del Bosque 2023; American Immigration Council 2025). U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sotomayor recognized the racist overtones in the Government's current approach to immigration, writing in a dissenting opinion, "We should not have to live in a country where the Government can seize anyone who looks Latino, speaks Spanish, and appears to work a low wage job. Rather than stand idly by while our constitutional freedoms are lost, I dissent" (*Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo*, 606 U.S. ___ (2025) (Sotomayor, J., dissenting), 2).

Part II: International Law, Migration, and Technology

Although travel across the U.S.-Mexico border into the United States is governed by U.S. and international law, the U.S.-Mexico border remains a site of unimaginable suffering. Since President Trump declared a national emergency at the border on January 20, 2025, his first day in office, U.S. law has been rapidly changing to limit who can enter the U.S. (Trump 2025a). International law, which includes a wide range of treaties and customs, is intended to constrain states from behaving in ways that would harm individuals and groups of people.

However, migrants' human rights are often denied as they exist in a "space of exception" where law is suspended, a "no-man's land" whose inhabitants have no rights under either U.S. or Mexican law (Agamben 2005, 1-2). International law, encompassing refugee law, humanitarian law, and human rights law, is the only body of law offering protection to refugees and asylum seekers hoping to enter the United States. Technology exacerbates the negative impact on human rights associated with crossing borders. As the former Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, E. Tendayi Achiume, stated "technology is never neutral — it reflects the values and interests of those who influence its design and use, and is fundamentally shaped by the same structures of inequality that operate in society" (United Nations 2020).

The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, also known as the Refugee Convention, is the most important international law instrument to protect the human rights of refugees and their treatment at international borders. The Convention, which entered into force on 22 April, 1954, has been signed by 19 states and ratified by 146 states. While the United States is not a signatory, it did play a significant role in the drafting of the convention and signed the 1967 Protocol removing the limits of the 1951 Convention which had restricted it to Europeans who became refugees prior to 1951 (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees 2011). The Convention established international norms which continue to shape states' policies and laws regarding refugees -- even for states which are non-signatories (Janmyr 2021, 212).

> The Convention defines a "refugee" as someone who,
>
> [O]wing to well-founded fears of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees 2010).

The interpretation of "being persecuted" has been the subject of much disagreement. Michelle Foster notes that the Convention itself does not define persecution, although it is generally agreed that human rights standards apply (Foster 2016, 230). The Convention's Preamble cites the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the U.N. Charter as foundational. Foster suggests that an interpretation of "persecution," or any other aspect of the Refugee Convention, must be understood within the wider context of international law which codifies agreed-upon harms (Foster 2016, 232). In support of this, Foster notes that a number of recent legal decisions recognize that limits on social and economic rights constitute persecution (Foster 2016, 230). U.S. courts have agreed that persecution can include economic deprivation such as "the deliberate imposition of severe economic disadvantage or the deprivation of liberty, food, housing, employment or other essentials of life'" (*Shi Chen v. Holder*, 604 F.3d 324 (7th Cir. 2010)). However, U.S. courts have limited a finding of persecution to something "'above and beyond those generally shared by others in the country of origin and involve noticeably more than mere loss of social advantage or physical comforts'" (*Ming Dong Chen v. Holder*, 379 F. App'x 107 (2d Cir. 2010)). This distinction is a significant factor in U.S. policy at the U.S.-Mexico border, because the majority of migrants are fleeing the extreme poverty and violence prevalent in their country. So the determination about whether they were being persecuted, and could therefore claim refugee status, depends on whether the poverty and violence they experienced was generalized in their country or was specific to them as individuals.

The Refugee Convention outlines the rights of refugees as well as the responsibilities of states based on the principles of non-discrimination, non-punishment, and non-refoulement (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees 2010). With respect to non-refoulement, the Convention prohibits Member States from returning a refugee to any state "where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees 2010). Part 2 of the same article of the Convention allows the return of refugees who are viewed as presenting a danger to the host country or who have been convicted "of a particularly serious crime" (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees 2010).

In 2014, the U.N. expressed concern about borderlands as "zones of exclusion for exception for human rights obligations" in its Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights at International Borders (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014, 1). These Guidelines emphasize the protection of all migrants, regardless of their reasons for seeking entry (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014, 2). While recognizing states' interests in

securing their borders, the Guidelines require the non-criminalization of migrants and those who help them (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014, iv-v). Every migrant is entitled to a judicial review of their circumstances and retains the right of appeal to that review (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014, 8). They discourage states from "curtailing" migration, as it endangers migrants and is ineffective (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014, 2). The Guidelines also prohibit discrimination on the basis of,

> [R]ace, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, nationality, migration status, age, disability, statelessness, marital and family status sexual orientation or gender identity, health status, and economic and social situation (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014, 8).

Furthermore, the Guidelines require that border governance measures adhere to the principles of non-discrimination as well as non-refoulement. These measures include "legislation, policies, plans, strategies action plans and activities related to the entry into and exit of persons from the territory of the State, including detection, rescue, interception, screening, interviewing, identification, reception, detention, removal or return, as well as related activities such as training, technical, financial and other assistance, including that provided to other States" (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2014). A spokesperson at the U.N. Human Rights Office expressed concern that digital technologies "are reshaping the very fabric of governance" at the borders "and impacting the human rights of migrants and refugees" (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023). In response to this developing situation, the U.N. Human Rights Council conducted a study, in collaboration with the University of Essex, on the use of digital tools in border governance (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2023).

The study highlights the human rights consequences of the increasing use of digital technologies and provides actionable steps to address these human rights concerns (McGregor and Molnar 2023). Digital border technologies refers to "the wide range of technologies from basic internet-enabled devices to more advanced forms of technologies, including those enabled by algorithms, automated decision-making, and artificial intelligence, which States and private actors already use or plan to use in border governance in the future" (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 8). The human rights which may be violated by the use of these technologies include human dignity, non-discrimination, privacy, freedom of movement, claiming asylum, liberty, and life (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 4). The use of digital border technologies may also adversely affect other rights such as freedom of expression, association and religion, education, housing, health, and privacy (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 4; Amnesty International 2023, 11). The algorithms in digital technologies harm individuals by intensifying the risk of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, sex, age, disability, nationality, and migration status (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 4; Amnesty International 2023, 9-10).

The violation of the freedom of thought has become increasingly relevant due to new developments, particularly the advances of surveillance technologies to read facial expressions. As the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom and Religion and Belief pointed out:

> Surveillance technologies deployed in 'counter-terrorism' and national security apparatuses threaten freedom of thought, among other rights, where they purport to reveal one's thought through interference … rooted in the idea that one can identify 'extremist thinking' and intervene before it manifests … authorities prosecute individuals without proving their correspondingly grave and guilty act (actus reus) shifting seamlessly from the criminalization of acts of terrorism to the criminalization of extremist thoughts and beliefs (United Nations 2021b).

The notion that a state can predict future criminal behavior based on the facial expressions of migrants is unrealistic (Rinaldi and Teo 2025, 71). Indices of "pre-crime" intent, such as facial expression, tone of voice, trembling, and sweating are also natural responses to the common migrant experience of "fear, tiredness, and constant threat of rejection" while crossing borders (Rinaldi and Teo, 2025, 71, 75).

One of the pillars of international law, sovereignty, has allowed for limited accountability and oversight over the use of technology at borders (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 8; Shahbaz 2025). Increasingly, states hire private actors to design and develop digital border technologies (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 9). This has led to the growth of a "border security industrial complex" controlled by a small number of corporations wielding "immense economic power and martial authority" (Zuker 2024). This war-like focus on the border has fueled anti-immigrant sentiments, particularly racism and xenophobia, which has resulted in governments' instituting policies that undermine human rights, including lengthy detention and refoulement (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 12; United

Nations 2025). A written statement submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council by the China Foundation for Human Rights Development, points to stigmatizing, demonizing, and degrading language directed toward immigrants by U.S. politicians during the 2024 presidential campaign (United Nations 2025, 2).

States' lack of transparency makes it difficult to compile a comprehensive catalog of digital border technologies, however several technologies are known. Surveillance technologies, such as electronic monitoring, digital ankle monitors, and "voice and facial reporting software," can undermine peoples' freedom of movement (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 14; Giustini et al. 2021, 18; Sherman-Stokes 2024). Polygraphs have been touted "as a 'virtual border agent kiosk developed to interview travelers at airports and border crossings' that can 'detect deception to flag to human security agents'" (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 13). Because polygraphs are unreliable, they are likely to perpetuate biases, stereotypes, and discrimination (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 13; Stanley 2018). This can lead to "the unjustified denial of an asylum claim or visa, detention, prosecution, refoulement, or violation of the right to family life through separation or denial of family reunification" (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 13).

Technologies have also been used to identify people within a country for removal (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 14). Border enforcement agencies have accessed databases to find people with an irregular immigration status which has resulted in deportation (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 14; Friedland 2018; Chishti and Putzel-Kavanaugh 2025). Some states have even accessed peoples' personal information such as, "'financial records, property records, past jobs, former marriages, phone subscriptions, cable TV bills, car registrations'" (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 14). This data feeds algorithms used to make decisions about whether or not to detain someone (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 14). The datasets on which algorithms base their decisions can include very biased and discriminatory data, and this is particularly prevalent with regard to gender, race, and ethnicity (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 14; United Nations 2024). In this way, the collection of data by states undermines human rights (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 15). Once data is collected, even if originally for humanitarian reasons, it is vulnerable to being shared for other purposes such as border enforcement (McGregor and Molnar 2023, 15).

Part III: Other Theoretical Frameworks: Cosmopolitanism and Sovereigntism

Besides the framework of international law, other theorists have proposed approaches to the protection of human rights at the border. These theoretical frameworks assign different weight to individual rights and thereby lead to different views about the use of surveillance technologies in the border context. Many of these theories fall somewhere on the continuum between cosmopolitanism and sovereigntism. Cosmopolitanism is primarily concerned with protecting the rights of an individual; that concern is universally applied to all individuals; and all people are generally considered responsible for protecting an individual's rights (Pogge 1992, 48). In the context of borders, this means that individual human rights would supersede national interest and should be protected by global institutions. Sovereigntism holds that national governments have almost complete authority over the protection of human rights; in the context of borders, this justifies the exclusion of migrants by states and therefore the use of technologies which support that goal (Dadhania 2022, 73). Some theorists propose a viewpoint, and assign responsibilities, somewhere in between these two paradigms. For example, the globalisation of protections has been criticized as potentially "a cover for imperialism" which leads to more human rights abuses; and state sovereignty has been credited with protecting human rights by promoting the right to self-determination (Conlon 2004, 75).

Liberal and postcolonial perspectives offer alternative views and solutions about states' approach to border control. A liberal "border script" is one where there is "an inherent tension between" individual and community self-determination (Drewski and Gerhards 2024, 90). This approach limits state authority only when it conflicts with the right to cross borders (Drewski and Gerhards 2024, 90). Pedro Salgado, a postcolonialist, criticizes the liberal acceptance of state sovereignty because of its association with colonialism (Salgado 2023). Salgado proposes rejecting state sovereignty altogether because it legitimises the authority of colonial legacies and results in reliance on colonial concepts land and property ownership "abstract and homogenising identities" (Salgado 2023). Salgado suggests that any solution to global issues will require "a deeper reassessment of political authority" (Salgado 2023). In the context of borderlands, this would require asking why "bordering [is] obligatory in the first place" (Goodfellow 2023). When considering theoretical frameworks for addressing the use of surveillance technologies at the border, concerns about the protection and enforcement of human rights can only be resolved by determining where the legal, moral, political, and ethical responsibilities lie.

Because of the multifaceted nature of border control and its associated technologies, the solutions most likely to be effective include elements of each of

these frameworks. International law codifies norms. Global institutional oversight ensures that sovereigntism does not bury human rights. Liberalism's willingness to limit sovereignty in light of the preeminence of self-determination offers a north star for evaluating border interactions. Postcolonial critiques guarantee the inclusion of individuals, rather than abstract groups, who are affected by global and state actions at borders.

Part IV: Policy Solutions

The United States continues to violate international law and the human rights of migrants and U.S. citizens alike. The use of AI and surveillance technologies has expanded well beyond the U.S.-Mexico border. In recent months, the Trump administration has ramped up the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and surveillance technologies against a wider range of people, including those in the U.S. with student visas (Caputo 2025). AI and surveillance technologies have begun increasingly to monitor immigrant's social media activity for anti-government, "anti-semitic," or "pro-Hamas" sentiment (Caputo 2025; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2025). Border Patrol under the Trump administration has also been taking further, and more extreme, steps to detain and deport "criminal illegal immigrants", efforts that have extended further into the interior of the United States (Trump 2025b; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2025; Wang et al. 2022). A new partnership between ICE and Palantir Technologies has promised a prototype of ImmigrationOS by September 25, 2025, which would allow ICE to "use artificial intelligence and data mining to identify, track, and deport suspected noncitizens" (Hubbard 2025). While the Trump administration's immigration policies continue to change at a rapid pace, there are several policy solutions to the negative impact of border technologies on human rights. These policies present both national and international solutions.

Policy Solution 1: Creation of an Independent Oversight Body

One possible solution is to create an independent, nonpartisan oversight body (either governmental or non-governmental) to monitor the development and use of AI and surveillance technologies in immigration and border enforcement. This oversight body should have the power to:

- Conduct annual or biannual audits on AI used by ICE, CBP, and other related agencies
- Evaluate algorithms used by these agencies for potential racial, gender, and political biases, as well as false positives particularly in the case of facial recognition or other biometric or predictive analytic tools
- Provide annual public reports on compliance with civil liberties, which include statistical data on how technologies are used
- Provide clear pathways for people to file complaints and seek recourse for harm caused by the unethical use or misuse of technology

This body should be made up of technology experts, legal experts, representatives from civil society, and members of impacted communities. The members should be selected based on their expertise and an intensive application and interview process, including an interview before an ethics review board of some kind. This policy would address the lack of accountability which characterizes the current situation.

Policy Solution 2: Increase Transparency About the Use of AI and Technology at the Border

In an increasingly connected and globalized world with easy access to the Internet, there is a surprising lack of transparency by government agencies regarding their use of AI and technology at the border. If information is publicly available, it is often incomprehensible for the average person to understand. To create greater transparency:

- Agencies should be legally required to release easy-to-understand documentation and/or reports that detail what technologies are being used, how data is collected and stored, how decisions are made, and what avenues exist for redress
- A centralized, publicly accessible website should be created to allow nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, journalists, and the public to hold institutions accountable

Policy Solution 3: Engage with Civil Society and Border Communities on AI & Surveillance Best Practices

Governments should work to include the perspectives of civil society actors and border communities in developing policies. Agencies and lawmakers should:

- Conduct forums, town halls, and community research partnerships particularly in border towns, and include representation from Indigenous and migrant-led organizations
- Fund studies by nongovernmental organizations into how the use of each surveillance technology affects local populations
- Create opportunities specifically for youth to participate in broader conversations about AI & surveillance technologies at the border

Policy Solution 4: Require Comprehensive Assessments Regarding Respect for Human Rights

Before using any AI or surveillance technology, agencies should be required to conduct human rights impact assessments, consistent with the U.N. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. These assessments would evaluate the potential for violations of the rights to privacy, due process, non-discrimination, and freedom of movement and expression. The U.S. government should:

- Require that all AI or surveillance technology programs used in border enforcement to be evaluated by a third party that is unaffiliated with the government
- These assessments should be independently reviewed and publicly available, and periodic assessments should also be built into long-term technology contracts with corporations
- Require that all new technologies be tested to determine potential violations of human rights
- Refrain from purchasing or using technology created by corporations that have past histories of being involved in human rights abuses

Policy Solution 5: International Cooperation

Given the transnational nature of surveillance technologies and data-sharing agreements, international cooperation is very important. The U.S. should:

- Allow U.N. Special Rapporteurs access to U.S. detention centers and AI governance processes to ensure alignment with U.N. human rights frameworks
- Actively participate in the U.N. Global Digital Compact and contribute to drafting international regulations and standards
- Ensure that all international agreements, in which the U.S. participates, for biometric or data-sharing meet minimum human rights standards

Under the auspices of the U.N., a Working Group to specifically address AI, surveillance technologies, and migration should be created to begin the process of discussing the drafting of a legally binding international treaty.

Policy Solution 6: Creation of an International Treaty Directly Addressing Migration, AI, and Surveillance Technologies

While regional bodies, such as the European Union (EU), have taken strides toward addressing surveillance technologies in law, there is no comparable international treaty under the U.N. system. The AI Act, which entered into force in August 2024 in the EU, specifically states that AI should not "be used to in any way infringe on the principle of non-refoulement, or to deny safe and effective legal avenues into the territory of the Union, including the right to international protection" (European Union 2024). A new international treaty is needed to regulate the use of AI and surveillance technologies in migration and border enforcement. This treaty should:

- Clearly prohibit the use of AI to profile, deny asylum, or automatically deport people
- Require governments to disclose algorithms used in border enforcement and offer migrants the right to contest decisions made by automated systems
- Include binding obligations drawn from existing international human rights instruments, including:
- The U.N. Charter
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- The U.N. Refugee Convention
- The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
- Be informed by General Comments from treaty monitoring bodies, such as the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers

While the above policy suggestions are not exhaustive, they provide the beginnings for a framework to address the protection of human rights at the border. However, this would require a U.S. administration which respects international law and human rights and which rejects President Trump's belief that the U.S. is "like a garbage can for the world" (Sullivan and Iyer 2024).

Conclusion

The use of artificial intelligence and surveillance technologies poses a serious threat to the human rights of migrants, especially those who are trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border, as well as those already residing within the U.S. The U.S. government has deployed these technologies in ways that facilitate racial profiling, violate the right to privacy, and create barriers to due process and asylum rights. Recent efforts, such as the Trump administration's revocation of student visas under the pretext of national security, demonstrate how technological tools can be weaponized to restrict

migration and target vulnerable populations. The human rights violations which result from the use of AI and surveillance technologies provide an opportunity for international cooperation to address these emerging threats.

Ultimately, the challenge before the international community is to confront the ways in which AI and surveillance are reshaping migration governance and to work collectively toward the creation of ethical standards, oversight mechanisms, and enforcement tools for domestic use. If left unchecked, these technologies risk exacerbating systemic injustices and global inequality. On an individual level, these border technologies make migration deadly, as it was for Elias Alvarado. By responding proactively, states and international institutions have a chance not only to defend existing human rights norms but also to reimagine a more just and humane approach to migration in the digital age.

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Old Songs Never Sung: Queerness in Appalachia

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Abstract

Research introduced throughout this study examines the various lived experiences of Queer individuals residing within the Central Appalachian region. This study explores what it means to be both Queer and Appalachian through individual narrative experiences and survey accounts of oppression, isolation, and found family. By comparing data collected from both ethnographic interviews and surveys, this study develops a thorough and nuanced picture of Queer Appalachia and its many hardships. This project analyzes what these trends indicate for different intersections of Queer communities within the region, and how they impact the current Queer experience within Appalachia. The author finds that the Queer community of Appalachia exists within a transitional period, walking a thin line between acceptance and rejection regarding the general public opinion of Appalachia. This study is the culmination of two semesters of undergraduate capstone research, with active research taking part over approximately four to five months.

Introduction

> "…I want so badly to love Appalachia, but there was so – there were so few parts of Appalachia that loved me as I was."

As these words left my interviewee's mouth, I knew they had inadvertently captured the identity struggle that many Queer Appalachians face as they struggle to adhere to the community surrounding them. They had just described the exact sensation of unrequited love that I had come to know personally as both a West Virginia native and a member of the Queer community. It came as no surprise to me that this sentiment would be voiced repeatedly through both survey data and interviews alike; the lack of visibility offered to Queer Appalachians has long left many feeling invisible and broken. When taking on this project, I acted with this understanding and had personally experienced how this lack had allowed for heavy isolation and loneliness within the region. This research stemmed from this lived understanding that the isolation I had grown up within was largely artificial. Within pop culture and research alike, Appalachia has largely been portrayed as locked in time, away from any possibility of growth and development. However, throughout my own experiences, it became apparent that the Queer community within Appalachia has long been fighting for a voice. This study follows in the framework of Claire Forstie's *Theory Making from the Middle*, as I aim to move away from the methodologies set in urban communities (2020). As an act of Community Ethnography, this study aims to define the unique challenges and needs faced by individuals of the queer Appalachian community from within.

Throughout this study, the gap in understanding for rural Queer communities is addressed through detailed personal narratives and survey data, thus illustrating the lived experiences of Queer Appalachian individuals. This is achieved through the analysis of both individual narrative accounts and surveys conducted throughout the region. This analysis aims to shed a community-focused light on the fast-growing body of research regarding the reality of Queer Appalachians. Considered within the experience of internal self-conflict are the definitions of both identities, how they conflict or complement one another, and how they form an individual's sense of gender and sexuality. This study stands as a small part of a much larger discourse surrounding LGBTQ rights within rural regions. While rural communities face various interpersonal conflicts, data presented in this study capture how the definition of Queer identity is shifting alongside the reality faced within Appalachian communities. This project is intended to build on a wide range of studies surrounding the social experience of rural queerness. Further, this project is intended to bring light to an underrepresented part of this discussion through the direct amplification of first-hand experiences.

Through the combined analysis of lived narrative accounts and survey data, I find that queerness in Appalachia is actively silenced and othered due to strong social stigmatizations founded in generational biases. Despite this, Queer individuals within Appalachia have begun to define community for themselves through determinations of "families of choice" rather than blood relations. Analysis shows the difficulties in social contradictions between existing ideals of what it means to be Queer and what it means to be Appalachian, and how this disconnect can cause a feeling of otherness within one's own community. Through the utilization of literature and research on Appalachia as a region and its relationship with queerness, this project begins

with a review of recent literature and theoretical work surrounding sexuality, identity, gender, and rural communities. This review also pulls from older articles in order to build a more complete and comprehensive understanding of how the region has been perceived in the past, and how this perception has impacted current research. An intersection is developed between existing literature and this project through the application of collected survey data from multiple Queer-identified persons throughout the region, as well as the application of personal narratives regarding an individual's relationship with their sexuality and gender versus that of their local community. For many Queer individuals who identify as Appalachian, their local community leaves them feeling othered and isolated. Through both review and analysis, this study observes the interpersonal identity conflict of Queer Appalachians and how a subculture quickly becomes a chosen family in the face of isolation and bigotry.

Abbreviations and Definitions

To facilitate understanding and ensure clarity within this study, common terms and abbreviations are defined herein.

Figure 1: Abbreviations and Definitions

Term or Abbreviation	Definition
Closeted	A Queer individual who has not disclosed their sexual preferences or gender identity.
HRT	Hormone Replacement Therapy.
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.
Out	A Queer individual who has disclosed their sexual identity. May also refer to the action of disclosing an individual's sexual identity to someone else.
Queer	Sexual, romantic, or gender identities that do not adhere to established cultural heterosexual norms and expectations. This term is capitalized when in reference to a community or an identity.

Placing the Queer Appalachia: Discussion of Literature

There has long been debate regarding whether Appalachia is classified as its own distinctive culture outside of the overlapping scope of Southern American culture. This discussion holds weight not only within anthropological study, but also within the scope of medical practice and psychological research (Denham 2015; Meit et al. 2022; Pasternak 2003; Revill and Gold 2018). Within this research, Appalachia is often characterized by strong values of reciprocity, non-confrontational tendencies, individualism, and intense poverty. Cultural traits are recognizable across the region but are far from being generalized in terms of expression and recognition (Denham 2015). "Appalachian Culture" has existed as a term for years now; however, the term falls short due to its historically loose usage within academic research. As identified by Philip Obermiller and Michael Maloney in 2016, the discussion of culture is commonly utilized via vague references rather than active expression. While Appalachia is largely considered overwhelmingly rural, many pockets within Appalachia are notably urban in comparison. Due to past misrepresentations, it is imperative to note that the use of culture in this review should not indicate a solid definition of heritage or values. Appalachia has been founded through various backgrounds and identities, many of which have developed diverse and unique subcultures despite the current academic generalization of Appalachian culture (Obermiller and Maloney 2016:10-11). With this in mind, rural Appalachia showcases specific cultural traits that are constant across the various subcultures within the region. Constant cultural traits are blue-collar culture, poor socioeconomic standing, strong familial values, and traditionalist religious beliefs. While urban regions of Appalachia represent a different population, these regions have far from fully abandoned these values, as they are still highly represented by research focused within those regions (Obermiller and Maloney 2016:8).

Looking at the existing literature surrounding the LGBTQ+ experience within the Bible-belt, it's clear why this region is oftentimes considered unsafe and unaccepting for those who do not fit within the traditionalist norms. Bernadette Barton (2010, 2020) is one of many academics who showcase how the practice of traditional orthodox Christianity within Appalachia stretches far beyond that of Sunday morning services and prayer over the table before each meal. The specific brand of religious homophobia found within Appalachia is undeniable; however, Barton notes that these extreme ideals are not diagnostic of Appalachia. The Appalachian Region has long been stereotyped as backwards, poor, unsophisticated, and out of touch (Barton and Currier 2020). While there may be some form of credibility to these statements, it is also necessary to acknowledge the opposing side of Appalachia that is progressive and accepting of those who fall outside of the traditionalist moral standards (Barton and Currier 2020; Mann et al.

2022; Ryerson et al. 2020). Despite this, many Queer individuals raised within Appalachia are made to feel as if they are sinful due to the overwhelming religious dogmas they were exposed to during their developmental years. Within more religious regions of Appalachia, common belief dictates that homosexuality and transgenderism are both perverted and unnatural. Those who were raised with a strong connection within the church often state that they felt intense levels of personal shame and disgust (Barton 2010). Those who were not raised within or exposed to the church still experienced the cultural aspects of religious fundamental values and faced forms of religious bigotry. Due to this, there is an overarching tendency for perceived worthlessness, social isolation, and abuse faced by Queer individuals living within the region.

These traditionalist views are best summarized by the theories developed by Gayle Rubin in *Thinking Sex*. When defining the "Charmed Circle", Rubin presents many of the fundamentalist values that are considered acceptable and moral. These values are reported as monogamous, non-pornographic, heterosexual, and must be within wedlock. Beyond these identifiers, morally acceptable sex also should be *vanilla* (without aspects expressed in BDSM circles), procreative, and private. These ideologies, as based on Rubin's theoretical standspeak, speak to how many individuals fail to understand the sexual experiences and desires of those who do not fit within their personal definition of normalcy. This subconscious refusal to accept socially taboo practices is why American sexual values are considered immensely puritanical when compared to the sexual norms of other large cultural groups (Rubin 2012:154). Rubin notes that individuals who consider themselves sexually moral struggle to define what separates the moral from the immoral, despite how strongly they oppose the immoral. When individuals move to develop a sense of sexual ethics, there is a strong tendency to avoid the idea of possible variations in sexual presentation and preference (Rubin 2012:156). Further, Rubin asserts that by punishing the aspects of sexuality that some may consider horrific, society reinforces a system where individuals may be punished for simply being deviant from sexual behaviors represented within the "Charmed Circle," regardless of whether there is any objective harm (Rubin 2012:159).

Forstie further develops the theoretical framework surrounding rural Queer communities. Much of what is currently understood within Queer research has been based upon the cultural norms found within urban communities. Forstie argues that the Queer community existing within smaller communities is not as disconnected or isolated as individuals may perceive themselves to be. Rather, rural Queer communities simply fail to fit within the current academic understanding of queer communities due to their different socioeconomic standards and privileges. Forstie defines the Queer communities found within rural areas and small cities as built on the back of "Chosen Family." (Forstie, 2020). Due to a limited understanding of queer communities, many scholars have mislabeled rural Queer communities as disconnected, isolated, and unstable. However, researching rural Queer communities offers an intimate insight into the social network that keeps these communities alive within a notably oppressive geopolitical position. It is also important to mention that rural Queer communities are fundamentally more fluid in their definition of queerness as a whole, as these communities are not afforded the luxury of exclusion or elitism. LGBTQ communities within rural regions are notably more open to exploring the different identities captured under the Queer umbrella due to a longing for connection and community (Forstie 2020). In agreement with Forstie's findings, the research found within this study directly agrees with the notion that Appalachian queer communities are open to a more fluid understanding of Queer identity and queerness when compared to their urban counterparts.

Perceived isolation faced by Queer individuals within Appalachia is contested heavily by the statistics shown in recent estimates of Queer populations. As shown in research by Andrew Flores and Kerith Conron, rural Appalachia holds a similar percentage of Queer individuals as notably urban regions of America (Flores and Conron 2023). The populations found within Appalachia are not nearly as dense as those in urban regions, but the ratio remains consistent. Conversation rarely forms within the same block of one's home, as many homes within Appalachia are greatly distanced from one another. (Ryerson et al., 2020). Alongside this, the personal experiences recorded in past research show that there is still a feeling of isolation and invisibility, regardless of how many other Queer individuals may exist within the region. Queer individuals within Appalachia face a unique brand of stigmatizing experiences that lead to minority stress. While I have noted a need for more research to be done to identify the source of minority stressors, there are theories that Queer Appalachians face health disparities and a lack of resources due to bigoted attitudes held by those with authority over their care. Additionally, many Queer individuals voice experiences of individuals attempting to "convert" them away from their sin, fear of their own family and home, and violent hate-based abuse (Mann et al. 2022). Queer Appalachians of rural backgrounds are noted to feel intensely othered from both aspects of their identity, experience an increased risk for disordered eating, and are often desperate to

obtain financial stability with hopes to flee the region (Savitsky 2021; Ryerson et al. 2021). This feeling of being othered is due to an incredibly vocal minority of the region that supports policy passed against LGBTQ rights, as it's impossible to feel safe within your own home when legislation is actively being passed in order to criminalize your existence.

It is in this sense of isolation that literature finds an observable overlap between the behaviorisms of the Queer community and the Appalachian community. To "hold your tongue" is a well-known phrase throughout much of rural Appalachia. In holding your tongue, you actively restrain yourself from vocalizing your own beliefs or opinions to avoid conflict and maintain peace in social situations. In Neema Avashia's own autobiography, she writes, "Even on a recent visit back to West Virginia, in the depths of the Trump era, the lawn sign game was minor league compared to Massachusetts'. People truly didn't advertise their political affiliations. I never knew how my neighbors voted…" (2022:52). In the same way that Queer individuals repress their identity out of feelings of shame and fear, Appalachian individuals may be more inclined to repress their opinions to avoid conflict or discourse (Denham 2015; Miet et al. 2022; Pasternak 2003). This overlap in identity relates to the previously discussed perception of isolation, but the need to repress oneself for being Queer in a mountain place runs far deeper. Be it the religious homophobia or the heavy hold of traditionalist values, there is a safety found in remaining agreeable for Queer Appalachians.

Setting and Methods

This research was conducted over the span of approximately 4 to 5 months of data collection from both surveys and ethnographic interviews. Data collection for this study focused on the population of the Central Appalachian Region. Overall, collected data corresponds with experiences seen specifically in Southwestern West Virginia, Northeastern Kentucky, and Northern Ohio. While many individuals hold intensely fond memories of Appalachia, the region has historically existed within a state of poverty and systematic oppression. Due to this, Appalachia has grown to be notorious for its poor socioeconomic standing in comparison to the expected standard within America (Denham 2015). Appalachia is regarded as a source of nostalgia and bittersweet comfort for its residents despite the intense poverty faced throughout their lives. Many individuals account for leaving the region for reasons such as economic growth and social stability, but would return if it were viable. However, for many individuals, the stresses of the traditionalist values and a decaying economy outweigh the metaphorical "call of the mountains." (Ryerson et al 2020; Slade 2021; Avashia 2022; Hannaford 2011; Black and Rhorer 1995).

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Marshall University as 2127296-3 and was performed over a 4 to 5 month period.. Foundational data for this project were collected through two separate methods in order to ensure that a proper understanding could be developed within the time constraints applied to this project. Data was collected through both surveys and conversational ethnographic interviews. Online surveys were distributed via email and SMS to individuals within Central Appalachia, with a focus on known Queer communities or Queer friendly spaces. In doing this, a total of 233 responses were collected. Only 147 surveys are included in data analysis due to the remaining 86 respondents providing data that indicated they were unrelated to research (Not identified as Queer, insufficient data, bigoted responses, etc.) Alongside this, 5 in-depth ethnographic interviews were conducted with a wide variety of different Queer Appalachian individuals. Ethnographic interviews explored personal definitions of both Queer and Appalachia, identity and belonging, minority stress and its causes within Appalachia, and how prejudice impacts interpersonal relationships. These interviews were formatted as free-form conversations in order to allow individuals the opportunity to present their own narrative constructions about their experiences. These narratives were often extended monologues with as minimal interruption as possible. While there were only five interviews, each interview led to more nuanced understandings of the observed individuals and their community at large. I have maintained contact with three of the five participants over the course of research. Participants for both survey and interview collection were found through both recruitment and snowball sampling. Initial interviews were conducted amongst individuals I already had prior contact with due to my involvement with the local Queer community. These persons were able to identify potential participants for both interview and survey. Interview participants also completed the survey, allowing their demographics to be included in quantitative analysis.

The survey for this research was composed of 22 questions based on participants' views of Appalachia, their experiences within the LGBTQ+ community, and how being part of the LGBTQ+ community has impacted their personal relationships. These focuses were split into 3 different sections, each section was composed of both open-ended and close-ended questions in hopes of contextualizing the abstract experiences of the given community. By utilizing rating scales alongside free response questions, data from this survey was able to

provide personal narratives similar to those provided during the interview process. This survey was developed and distributed online using Qualtrics, maintaining full anonymity of participants in order to avoid the risk of inadvertently exposing closeted queer individuals. Particularly, a majority of the questions allowed participants the opportunity to provide context for their responses. By ensuring participants have the opportunity to write and describe their own stories, respondents who were unable to be scheduled for direct interview were still able to provide their stories for analysis.

Data

Conversation throughout this research is viewed as a complex process in which one can gain insight into multiple facets of one's ideologies and experiences. In this, conversational interview was utilized in order to define and understand the scope of a participant's lifetime experiences. Within the interview process, participants expressed a sense of lost confidence in their sense of belonging amongst their Appalachian peers if they were not also self-identified as Queer. All interviewees, regardless of age, expressed that they feel a stronger sense of family and belonging amongst like-minded peers who shared an understanding of their experiences. Due to this, each participant expressed intense care for their personally chosen family. The participants were notably split in half on whether they were comfortable being socially out within the region. Participants who were transparent about their identity noted utilizing their voice to speak for those who cannot due to unsafe circumstances. Gender-Queer respondents (nonbinary, transgender, gender-fluid, etc.) noted that they experience a particular sort of discomfort and isolation within their community. Research within this study was restricted due to both the allotted timeline for research and regional travel difficulties.

Figure 2: Demographics

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percent
Age	<19	18	12.2%
	20-29	87	59.2%
	30-39	25	17.0%
	40-49	13	8.8%
	50<	4	2.7%
Gender Identity	Female	60	40.8%
	Male	22	15.0%
	Nonbinary	21	14.3%
	Transgender	11	7.5%
	Other	7	4.8%
	Non-Disclosed	26	17.7%
Sexual Identity	Pansexual/ Bisexual	79	53.7%
	Homosexual	43	29.3%
	Asexual	12	8.2%
	Heterosexual	1	0.7%
	Other	12	8.2%
Home State	West Virginia	121	82.3%
	Ohio	11	7.5%
	Kentucky	10	6.8%
	Other	5	3.4%
Years of Appalachian Residency	>10	20	13.6%
	11-20	49	33.3%
	21-30	54	36.7%
	31-40	12	8.2%
	41-50	9	6.1%
	50<	1	0.7%
	Non-Disclosed	2	1.4%

Results and Discussion

Perception of Isolation

Appalachia, for many Queer individuals, presents itself as a region in which one is isolated, othered, and ultimately alone. While this does not coincide with demographics shown within study participants or the represented population, Queer individuals often feel as if they are the only ones who can understand their lived experiences. Due to this, a majority of Appalachian Queer individuals assume that nobody in their local area can relate to their experiences of sexual attraction, oppression, or their romantic experiences. When participants did eventually come to meet individuals who did share their identity in some aspect, Appalachian culture still presented itself as overbearingly heteronormative and unaccepting. Of the conducted interviews, one interviewee expressed their struggles in trying to locate an authentic Queer-friendly space in Appalachia.

> "…There is one gay bar within vague proximity to me. It is still a 30-minute drive, and I don't have a car -I don't have a car, but it's a 30-minute drive to get to the one specifically clear place within any close proximity to me, one state and town over. I have to go that far. And in that place, it was just as

> likely that I talked to somebody, and they go *Sorry, I'm straight* as it would be for me to find another Queer person there…"

It is through this quote that the interviewee offers insight into the multiple differing aspects that would lead to feelings of isolation within Appalachia. At face value, it is incredibly evident that designated spaces for Queer individuals are far and few between. Similar sentiments were expressed in the interviews conducted by Abbey K. Man, as many of the participants in this study also expressed that places designed to be Queer designated safe spaces- such as gay bars and clubs- are not guaranteed to be genuinely accepting of Queer individuals due to the exoctification of queer identities (Mann et al. 2022). Navigating spaces that are consistently shifting and changing raises a strong challenge to the development of a sense of belonging, especially for those living within a region that feels as if it is actively rejecting them. While I did have participants express that they were able to form groups online or within their high schools, this aspect fully depended on the notion that they had accepted and realized their own identity while in adolescence.

This same participant also noted that their access to gender affirming care, such as HRT, was incredibly limited. To receive any sort of gender affirming care, this participant was required to travel six hours round-trip for their first screening appointment alone. To complicate matters further, this participant was also required to fill their prescriptions outside of their home state solely to ensure they would have stable access due to the different legal restrictions on HRT present within their state. This, in correspondence to the presented quote, shows that Appalachia currently lacks accommodation for the needs of a Queer population. I hesitate to state that this is fully due to a lack of acceptance, as the lack of Queer visibility within Appalachia is stark in contrast to other regions across the nation. To provide an example as an illustration of this, many healthcare providers within Appalachia are not even offered training in LGBTQ+ specific care or treatment (Mann et al. 2022; Savitsky 2021; Slade 2021). With this, even if one wished to be able to provide LGBTQ+ care and support, they lack both the training and the funding in order to maintain services such as HRT.

Despite this, statistics collected via survey dictate that Appalachia does not have a fundamentally lower density of Queer populations in comparison to other regions across America. This has also been supported by the analysis of population estimates as performed by both Flores and Conron (2023) as their own analysis found that population density of LGBTQ+ individuals in Appalachia is similar to that of highly populated states such as California, New York, or Florida. Despite this, Queer Appalachians exist within a position where they are made to feel isolated despite the reality that Appalachia is not any less Queer than other regions across the nation. The traditionalist values that dictate much of rural Appalachia have highly contributed to the othering of Queer sexuality and identity. In other words, those who realize themselves as Queer have never been exposed to someone who shares their experiences due to either the widespread fear of being out, thus leading them to feel as if nobody can relate to their experiences.

Self-Preservation and Minority Stress

For many Queer individuals, Appalachia is a region plagued by bigoted paradigms within the general population. In this, it is no assumption to state that the environment of rural Appalachia is far from welcoming. Many of my survey participants particularly noted that they will remain closeted for their sense of safety and comfort, as being open about their identity places them at high risk. As has been noted by previous research, Queer individuals are often ostracized for their identity and experience a high degree of minority stress due to the oppression placed against them. Within Appalachia, this can lead to othering, abuse, and isolation in the name of perceived morality and sexual purity (Mann et al. 2022; Barton 2010; Ryerson et al. 2020). Queer individuals know the dangers of their region not only through the general ideas of popular beliefs aligned with the Appalachian public, but also through the lived experiences of the trauma faced by themselves and their peers alike. A participant reflected on this in their discussion of their own observations.

> "I have too many friends- too fuckin' many friends who were kicked out of their houses who were hurt, who were hurt, physically hurt by their parents who were thrown out. I have had too many people in my life- I have too many people in my life who suffered these horrible traumas."

While this participant later reminisced that they were obscenely lucky that their own traumas with their gender and sexuality were much quieter, the frustration showcased in this quotation spoke volumes to how "on guard" Queer individuals remain for the sake of their own safety. Alongside his quote, most of my interviewees expressed that Appalachia as a region was best perceived as unsafe and unpredictable. From the survey data, 86 of the 147 responses that did align with being LGBTQ stated that they found Appalachia to be unsafe. Considering the rise in hate-based crimes within southern regions of the United States, many participants stated that they chose to remain closeted due to the high risk of abuse and violence. Within survey responses, many cited Appalachian trends of gun ownership, religious bigotry, and current legislation as reasoning for remaining entirely

closested. Others also stated that they curated who they were out to within their own social groups, essentially maintaining multiple identities in order to avoid rejection or abuse. Within these respondents, many recounted the hatred they had felt from people they used to consider family. Further, many even noted being rejected from their church due to the "sinful" nature of their sexual identity.

As literature has already discussed, there is a tendency for both Appalachian and Queer communities to adopt a culture of agreeability. For Queer individuals living within the breadth of Appalachia, this need to remain agreeable and palatable is imperative to their personal safety and well-being. For this reason, many individuals find it more beneficial to hold their tongue and accept that they may never be in a position to safely come out to their friends or family. When a participant silences themself and represses their identity, they are able to blend into their community and maintain important relationships. For example, one may choose to ignore their identity as a Queer individual in order to maintain a relationship with their parents, as they would rather remain palletable than lose their familial relationships.

This behavior reaches beyond queer individuals as well, as many outside individuals may refuse to advocate for the queer people in their lives in order to avoid straining their own relationships. Due to this, the act of self-advocacy within Appalachia is incredibly difficult due to the idea that differing ideologies are a matter of compromise rather than identity. One of my participants stated that they had acquaintances who tolerated them but refused to change their beliefs or ideologies due to familial pressure and personal comfort. From what they had experienced, they believe that family plays an important role in what someone is willing to endure, and that many will choose to remain agreeable solely to protect their own peace.

> "Because if they change their ideology, then they have to fight back against their entire family that believes in one ideology. If it comes out that you voted for something that's more blue and you're in this red household, then you're gonna get picked on and teased and bullied and told you're ruining America. It's just easier to stay in your ways."

The sense of hopelessness that comes from the lack of safety, the perception of being isolated, and the inability to vocalize one's own lived experiences is undeniable. For many, the effects of this manifest as raised risks of substance abuse, depression, and anxiety due to an inability to find belonging and trust amongst their loved ones.. As will be discussed in later sections, these risks are also influenced by the prevalence of religious values, and personal family values are set against an individual's sexuality or gender identity (Mann et al. 2022). These experiences in total reflect the exact experience recounted by Avashia in her own biography, as many Appalachian individuals believe that a difference of opinion should not harm a relationship, regardless of the implications and consequences of those opinions. Avashia directly notes, as did many of study participants, that repressing their own identity in order to protect the comfort of her loved ones ensured that she could maintain a sense of belonging, even if others would never consider her protecting her peace in the same fashion (Avashia 2022).

There is a tendency for Queer Appalachians to downplay their experiences in order to appeal to those around them. Many interviewees note that when they were afforded the opportunity to discuss their sexuality or gender identity, they were not listened to and their experiences were disregarded. A majority of participants' families would either directly ignore the fact of their identity or dictate that their identity was a phase that would pass on as they matured. Alongside this, participants noted that it was easier for them to discuss their identity if they expressed it through a sense of humor or sarcasm. This phenomenon of downplaying one's own identity through self-depreciative humor was starkly present through both forms of data collection despite the fact I did not see this reflected in current literature. This aspect of socialization seems to offer a sort of power for those who are at risk of being ostracized due to their identity, allowing them to take control in an uncomfortable situation. One interviewee described the sensation when asked how they felt the community perceived them, and why it was easier for them to form their identity as a joke.

> "I've spent my whole life making a joke out of all my differences, because it's a lot easier for people to laugh with you than at you. So, if I make the jokes before they can, then like suddenly, I'm a part of it."

This interviewee later confirmed that they felt they performed this sort of humor towards their identity as a defense mechanism- that it was the best way for them to avoid bigotry aimed towards them in both childhood and adulthood alike.

Religious Culture

For Appalachia, Christianity and its social practices are omnipotent. These beliefs reach far beyond the pews of any church, as they have intertwined themselves into almost every aspect of daily life (Mann et al. 2022; Ryerson et al. 2020; Barton 2010; Dakin et al. 2022). The degree to which religion was cited as a hardship for Queer individuals throughout the course of data collection was

staggering. There is a noticeable distinction in the form of religious homosexuality experienced within Appalachia, however, due to its association with the Bible-Belt. The Bible-Belt is an informal distinction offered to a portion of the United States that holds a disproportionately high percentage of the population that identifies as conservative Christians. Within this, central Appalachia is defined as the metaphorical "Buckle" of the Bible-Belt due to both its centralized location and its high density of Christian populations (Mann et al. 2022; Barton 2010). All but one of my interviewees had a close-knit tie to the church at some point in their lives; this pattern continued in survey participants as a majority were raised within the church. Of those with experiences in the church, all of them noted having gained some sort of shame and guilt in relation to their identity during their developmental years. One participant reminisced on how they tried to "pray away" their queerness once they realized it as part of their identity.

> "We were raised Baptist, and I had bought it hook, line, and sinker and was a true believer. And I kept asking God to take it away to let just- let me be, let me go and live my life. And nothing changed. Right? So, either nobody was listening, or God gave me my answer. And I didn't like the answer…"

This sentiment is one that is notably common; it was reflected constantly in data collected from both interviews and surveys alike. Religious bigotry tends to stand as a source of internalized shame for those raised within the church, as many often voice that they were made to feel damned, flawed, or sinful due to their sexuality. In this quote, the interviewee voices that they begged their god to change their sexuality into something "normal."

Of course, the definition of what is considered normal is defined by what is accepted by the majority of the social culture of Appalachia. Furthermore, as seen in literature, anything considered outside the breadth of Appalachian culture is offensive and unwelcome in most scenarios (Pasternak 2003; Denham 2015). In terms of Appalachian religious homophobia, the attitudes tend to trend towards the abjection and antagonization of Queer individuals. In recent years, hyper-conservative viewpoints have asserted that Queer individuals are perverted, inherently sinful, and immoral. The attitudes adopted towards Queer individuals and their ideologies are oftentimes needlessly cruel and unusual, with many trending towards ideas of violence and abuse in the name of dehumanization and moral purity (Mann et al. 2022; Barton 2010; Denham 2015). One interviewee reflected on the verbal onslaught of a religious organization protesting a local pride event when asked to detail an event that defined their experience as Queer within Appalachia.

> "All I can hear was *all of you deserve to be hung by a noose and dragged by a truck*. And this came from a guy holding a Bible in his hand and a sign in the other hand. He was speaking through somebody else's megaphone. Because we're not people to them- we're not. We're souls to be saved and numbers to be added to pews- tallies."

Queer individuals within Appalachia are not offered a sense of humanity until they either silence themselves or conform to the social norms that have long been considered acceptable by the religious public. For many, the relationship between Appalachian Christianity and queerness is one wrought with stress, fear, and disgust. This perception dictates the Appalachian region as one that has become intensely difficult to navigate as a Queer individual due to how deeply religion has integrated itself into the roots of the local culture. I find this best illustrated by a quote shared by an interviewee when they explained just how they have observed religious attitudes within Appalachian social practice.

> "Even at my workplace, I still get bombarded with it. I was at work the other day, and I was just having like, a nice conversation with this older woman. And she pulled out a Bible pamphlet. It was like, I she, I think it's for her. I feel like it. She wants me to be taken care of. But to me, it feels like I'm just being, like, slapped in the face."

Alongside this, many Queer Appalachians who remain religious feel that they're forced to choose between their faith and their sexual preferences or gender identity. Within rural regions, a majority of religious individuals experience intensive stress and trauma regarding their spiritual journeys and their interpersonal religious relationships. However, the reality of this is not entirely negative. Although a minority of study participants, some survey respondents recorded being accepted within their religious community. This phenomenon is also highlighted in very few of the participants in Dakin's (2022) research on spiritual rural queers. Some religious participants in this study did state that while they previously had incredibly adverse experiences in their religious journey, they were able to eventually find a space that does welcome them despite the common Christian bigotry held against their identity. While this does not discredit the experiences of those held to the bigoted values of Appalachian religious dogma, it must be acknowledged that there is an emerging part of the Christian Appalachian community that is working diligently to build a space that is both progressive and accepting of

Queer lifestyles. Many spiritualist and pagan groups have also opened themselves up to Queer individuals. While these groups also come under fire within Appalachia, the fact that Queer individuals within the region now have religious groups that do accept them is important and in desperate need of further research.

Found Family

The concept of found family is diagnostic of Queer communities within small cities and rural regions, specifically, as the ability for larger communities to form is far more fragile due to the nature of these regions. In a found family, connections are close-knit and strong in order to form a familial structure; however, these bonds are not formed through blood relations. Instead, relationships form based on shared experiences and traumas. These relationships are based on the inherent ability to understand one another's experiences and hardships (Forstie 2020). Most of my survey participants and interviewees voiced that they didn't feel that Appalachia had stable, large-scale communities for Queer individuals, as the ability to be that outwardly Queer is something that has only seen acceptance within the last twenty or so years. However, Queer individuals noted that they instead worked to cultivate personal inner circles that are almost entirely Queer regarding identity. These sorts of bonds tend to form between individuals who are denied a relationship with their own blood-related family due to conflict over aspects of their identity they cannot control. This phenomenon is noted in Forstie's (2020) own analysis of rural queer communities; however, this study has found a nuanced and intimate view of these dynamics. As discussed earlier, it is not uncommon for Appalachian queers to feel isolated due to the lack of understanding and support expressed openly towards their struggles within the region. When this is mixed with families who may also hold hyper-religious traditionalist values, it is far from uncommon for families to reject or disown their own over shame regarding identity and sexuality. When asked why they began distancing from family, one interviewee noted that their family didn't seem to care to understand their challenges, despite the strong familial values expressed within Appalachia.

> "Your family just has to be your friends sometimes. Because the people that you build around yourself, they typically at least care enough about you to try to understand, and they don't have this blood relation that they feel is more valid than any amount of care they could put in."

For Queer individuals within Appalachia, there is a universal understanding that the region is near impossible to navigate without remaining closeted to a majority of the public. Due to this, there is a value offered toward the unspoken bond between individuals who share the traumas associated with being Queer in a conservative space. While most participants note they were unable to form any sort of personal found family or small community until they were at least a teenager, the pursuit of building these personalized families alleviates the isolation and othering that many Queer Appalachians face. Of the participants in both survey and interview, there was a noticeable difference between the outlooks of the individuals who did have Queer connections and those who never had the chance to form these relationships. For this purpose alone, it remains intensely important that those who can speak out about their sexual identity or gender identity within Appalachia continue to do so. One participant who remains active in protests and Queer organizations noted that they would always have a space for Queer individuals they came across, regardless of how bonded they were.

> "We have to stick together. And it's kind of understood that it's an unspoken rule… It doesn't matter how close we actually are, doesn't matter how much- we're friends. We're family."

Another participant also expanded on this same point, providing further insight into how the concept of shared trauma and understanding can build feelings of sympathy and community within a demographic that is often subject to isolation and abjection.

> "It feels like we're more tight-knit, even if we're not like really close friends, just because we all kind of understand the background. Yeah, most of us have gone through it. Most of us understand that it's not easy- that it's hard coming out to your family."

Within both statements, we see that the concept of found family forms so that those who have nobody else to confide in can have a support system that truthfully loves them for who they are. Many participants voiced having their found family, and then their blood family. To their blood family, many of these individuals have cultivated a sort of faux identity so that they are able to maintain some form of relationship. As discussed earlier, this sort of dissonance can deepen feelings of isolation and otherness. The formation of found families helps to alleviate the stresses of not belonging to any community or family alike.

Acceptance and Visibility in Appalachia and Beyond

As indicated by previous discussions, acceptance within Appalachia is notoriously lower than that of other regions due to a multitude of different factors. In recent years, legislation has been passed in order to criminalize the expression of Queer identity. In recent years, Anti-Transgender legislation has taken the forefront

as West Virginia passes these proposals into action at an accelerated rate despite public opposition (Slade 2021). A majority of participants voiced frustration and fear concerning the attitudes of Appalachia's governing systems. Many state representatives within Appalachia are pushing for policies that would strip away rights and visibility from an already disadvantaged community. These policies support arguments that assert that queerness is a means of corrupting and harming children in hopes of conforming them towards an immoral lifestyle through perversion (Slade 2021). This ideology is outspoken and exists as a major platform for many Appalachian politicians through the guise of protecting childhood innocence and purity. While these claims insight further othering and minority stress for Appalachian Queer individuals, it also indicates that visibility for the community is now recognizable. With more people being exposed to the concept of queerness, the opportunity for discussion and education emerges. A majority of survey participants noted that they had noticed an uptick in vocal Queer discourse within Appalachian media. Many participants also noted an optimistic sense of awareness and acceptance acquisition within urban regions of Appalachia, though this trend is not expressed otherwise.

Despite this, the aspect of acceptance within Appalachia is currently in a state of limbo regarding whether it will improve or not. As discussed throughout this section, the values of Appalachia are deeply rooted in familial values and traditions. In a sense, the widespread beliefs of Appalachia are largely generational and rarely change through personal intervention. In the event of intervention one risks social isolation and familial conflict, meaning that they're forced to forgo certain cultural values if they wish to advocate against bigoted ideologies. This poses great risk to Queer activist movements within the region, as many individuals will side with their immediate family's values unless they personally are harmed by these values. Individuals who do support Queer rights may avoid openly vocalizing them due to fear that they may face interpersonal repercussions for these opinions (Forstie 2020; Ryerson et al. 2020). Many individuals opt to continue aligning with whichever belief is considered most acceptable within their inner circles in order to protect their own comfort. When discussing this aspect, one participant voiced their frustrations with acquaintances they had who would claim they supported them.

> "…But you're actively voting for people who will take my rights away. Actively voting for people who won't let me marry my partner. You're actively voting for people who won't let my friends transition."

This ties back to the earlier discussion of Appalachia's tendency to value agreeability and silence for the sake of comfort, but it also speaks to the weight of familial approval and acceptance. With individuals fawning performative advocacy with no effort to change their understanding of the world, Appalachia becomes a difficult and unpredictable environment for Queer individuals to navigate. Paranoia and distrust naturally results from the realization that people will voice advocacy to Queer individuals directly while directly advocating against Queer rights alongside other individuals.

In terms of being out within Appalachia, many Queer individuals prefer to adopt more heteronormative performances of identity while in public. One participant stated that while they do not actively feel in danger, the lack of support makes the performance of their identity questionable.

> "It's not something that I don't feel safe or comfortable just being out in public with, like, I don't feel like I'm fearful for my life or actually threatened, just I feel like there's some significant stigma or a significant lack of open support."

The lack of advocacy and acceptance within Appalachia presents a very unfortunate truth about the region. Even in individuals who do not promote violence or conversion towards Queer existence, their silence is seldom indicative of understanding and acceptance. Due to this, many participants who are comfortable being out within Appalachia noted that they find it important to remain "loud and proud," as many Queer individuals within Appalachia are not in an environment where they're safe to advocate for themselves without risk of displacement or abuse. Due to these factors, many Queer individuals within Appalachia do not feel accepted by the community they call home. While many note that they will always hold a place in their hearts for Appalachia, they have either already moved away from or plan to leave the region.

Within the research conducted throughout this study, there was also an indication that Queer individuals who had left Appalachia in search of more accepting communities had also faced issues in finding acceptance. While this had been presented in prior literature, this theme appeared more in research than expected. Specifically, literature had indicated that existing stereotypes against Appalachia had begun to lose prevalence as the region gained visibility in recent years due to tragedies such as the Opioid Epidemic. However, these stereotypes have remained prevalent in both traditionalist and progressive communities alike. Due to the stereotypes held against Appalachia, many individuals struggle to prove themselves as "Queer enough" for safe spaces outside the region (Denham

2015). Many of my participants voiced having a sense of pride in their Appalachian identity despite understanding that it proved difficult for them both inside and outside of the region itself. While Appalachia tends to reject its Queer community, Queer communities tend to reject Appalachian identity out of fear that it will uphold the same traditionalist values that have advocated against queerness. I find that the lack of research and visibility for Appalachia is in part responsible for these assumptions. While stereotypes surrounding Appalachia already dictate it as a backwards, uneducated, and hypermasculine culture, there is a lack of understanding offered towards those who aim to advocate from within the region.

For many Queer individuals advocating for Queer acceptance within Appalachia, their advocacy also pushes for the visibility of their community (Barton and Currier 2020). Through advocacy comes the dismantling of stereotypes surrounding Appalachian culture and what can be accomplished within rural communities. While there is an intensely vocal sect of Appalachia that is dangerously against anything that advocates for Queer rights, it is important to provide visibility to these individuals. Many participants noted that they struggled to fully express themselves outside the region due to these stereotypes, and while they could argue against them, it resulted in a sense of being othered. In this, it is realized that Appalachian queers are not currently offered a sense of community where they will fully fit with their peers. Due to the socialization and stereotypes prevalent within Queer and Appalachian communities, it is difficult for Queer Appalachians to feel fully accepted within either area.

Limitations and Implications

Due to the inherent time constraints of a capstone project, the only stable opportunity I had to participate with the community directly was through Stonewall, the only established gay bar located in Huntington, West Virginia. However, in the interest of maintaining respect for the Queer community at large, I found it best not to include this within my data collection. The Queer community has long been faced with stereotypes of hyper-sexuality, immorality, and sin- especially within rural regions such as the one focused on within this research (Rubin 2012; Dakin et al. 2022; Slade 2021; Ryerson et al. 2020; Barton 2010; Mann et al. 2022). If participant observation is to be utilized in this realm of research, I find it important that a range of different Queer spaces are explored. While it goes without saying that Queer spaces built around sexuality and recreation are important, these spaces only capture a minority of the Queer community. Many of my participants stated that they had never been interested in gay bars, had never felt safe enough to exist within a gay bar, or that Stonewall specifically was no longer a Queer specific space due to its novelty status amongst outsiders. For this reason, Stonewall was ultimately excluded from research.

As stated through the discussion of literature, the Appalachian region is more than its rural aspects. Urban and metropolitan communities represent aspects of Appalachia that are often missed in academic research. In defining Queer communities within Appalachia, numerous questions remain about what urban communities share with their rural counterparts. However, this research was never meant to be focused on this concept, as answering for both rural Appalachia and urban Appalachia would push the scope of research too broad. I feel that if researchers aim to address the differences and similarities between the experiences of these communities, more literature regarding urban Appalachian regions would need to exist. Throughout this project focus remained on solely the rural aspects of Appalachia due to the availability of existing literature regarding this specific niche. Central Appalachia is largely rural with sparse pockets of metropolitan areas, many of which still fall under rural classifications due to population. Despite the geographic focus of this study, I expect these trends to carry over to other regions of Appalachia that either overlap with the Bible-Belt or share rural classifications.

The approach utilized throughout this project is not intended to define a culture for Queer Appalachia, instead, it is intended to focus on individual experiences and trends shown throughout the different intersections of queerness in Appalachia. Due to this, the focus within this project was formed in an attempt to capture the different aspects of the Queer Appalachian identity. In a sense, I aimed for this project to answer the question of what it means to be Queer within the concept of Appalachian culture. I recognize that there is currently research aiming to redefine Appalachia, as some academics argue that Appalachia lacks the needed classification to be considered a defined culture. As an Appalachian researcher, I understand and acknowledge where I may hold bias in observance of this argument. However, I believe that Appalachia as a region is home to its own culture as well as many distinct subcultures, as the belief that culture must be solid and consistent is rarely applicable to any defined cultural region. The attitude taken within this project was formed based on the personal narratives as identified by participating Appalachian natives, as the acknowledgement of Appalachia as a culture was constant. While participants debated whether the Queer community existed, literature backed the decision to refer to Queer Appalachian groups as a community as long as the intersections of status, race, and belief were addressed.

During the pursuit of data collection, there was a massive oversight in the importance of racial and ethnic data regarding both Appalachia and Queer culture alike. Due to this, there was no substantial data collected regarding participants' ethnicity or racial identity. The study of intersectionality is intensely important when it comes to cultural relativity and understanding of one's experiences as an individual within a set culture. By forgoing the collection of this sort of data, I acknowledge that I cannot speak for the wide variety of subcultures and communities within Appalachia and the differing struggles they may encounter due to this oversight. If provided the opportunity to revisit this study, I will prioritize reworking both my survey and my approach towards data collection to gather insight into how this intersection affects an individual's sense of acceptance and understanding.

I find that the range of Appalachian Queer communities is best described as a group that is currently fighting for acceptance through a highly transitional period for the region. The need for visibility and advocacy within Appalachia is high, as public attitude towards queerness within Appalachia is opening to discussion due to the rising visibility and volume of Queer Appalachians. Further research could examine what this transitional period implies for the Appalachian community as a whole, as there is implication that it has affected more than just the legal protections for Queer individuals. While this research was not able to look deeper into what these different directions of transition are, both research and literature indicate that what is currently accepted as moral within Appalachian religious dogmas may be shifting as different ideologies gain visibility. Along with this, I find reason to believe that senses of community and familial values are changing due to the socioeconomic struggles within the region. However, data presented within this study cannot fully dictate any conclusions regarding these phenomena. In possible continuations of this study, more in-depth surveys and interviews would need to be conducted in order to speak to these concerns. Further research within this study should also aim to define aspects of the issues posed to the community and their direct implications for individual comfort and growth. Specifically, I would be inclined to perform further research on religious homophobia and bigotry, as the values expressed within these social practices rarely align with the values of Christianity as expressed within their own texts and psalms. The politicization of these values would need to be examined, as well as the experiences of Queer individuals who have been directly made victims to this specific brand of hatred.

Conclusion

The case of queerness within rural Appalachia is one that is currently underrepresented in the academic scope due to a lack of visibility. Despite the fascination with Appalachia within social research, Queer Appalachian communities have only received a spotlight in the educational community within the last ten years. While the Queer individuals within Appalachia are susceptible to being isolated and othered, the vocalization of the different Queer communities has recently garnered visibility as the ability to do so within the region presented itself. Many Queer Appalachians voice concerns with being out in public spaces due to the prominent traditionalist conservative values within rural Appalachia. However, the push for advocacy within Appalachia to raise visibility in contrast to the viewpoints spread by both the religious dogma of Appalachia and the politicization of queerness. While defined communities are scarce throughout central Appalachia due to the issues of minority stress and self-preservation via selective silence, Queer Appalachians find community through the formation of found families. A community formed from the understanding of shared trauma alleviates the effects of minority stress due to being disowned or ostracized from relatives, thus finding familiarity in a region that is unwelcoming. Many Queer Appalachians face internalized identity conflicts due to the inability to fit within both Appalachian spaces and Queer spaces, as both hold stigmatized ideologies regarding the other.

The findings made throughout this study have contextualized the broad notion of Queer Appalachia, identifying the nuanced and unique experience of a region with a rich history and a complex social environment. In the pursuit of expanding on the findings made by academics currently devoted to defining the rural queer experience, I have found that the realm of Appalachian queer communities is defined by the formation of found families and the inherent adaptation of self-preservation rooted in Appalachian social practices. Alongside this, this study has identified core issues within Appalachia that currently prevent the region from being inclusive to queer individuals. Of these issues, data presented in this study found that Appalachia is wrought with issues of visibility, religious bigotry, and the overwhelming lack of accommodations for queer healthcare and lifestyle. Despite this, Appalachia was found to have a similar queer population to the majority of other regions spanning America, showing that this isolation is most likely a product of being othered and abused due to the strong stigma held against sexual minorities.

Advocacy and visibility are imperative for the Queer communities held within the heart of the mountains, as the deconstruction of stereotypes regarding Appalachia begins with the understanding that individuals who are harmed by the more conservative viewpoints

of the region still exist within Appalachia. Appalachia is notably in a transitional period regarding the acceptance of Queer individuals. While the treatment of queerness within Appalachia is still questionable due to a lack of visibility and the generational pressure to uphold familial viewpoints, the ability for Queer individuals to be vocal in a historically hostile region is indicative of the ability for growth and progress regarding the acceptance of these communities. As more individuals begin to advocate for the rights of Appalachians across the region who may not be provided the privilege or the safety to vocalize their queerness, the perception of the region shifts. While there is currently no space where Appalachian queers both within and outside of Appalachia, the community remaining within the mountains still needs visibility afforded to them in order to garner further research and acceptance within their own community. Regardless, the community remaining within the grasp of the mountains is one best defined by resilience due to their strong voice in the face of abjection and dehumanization.

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X-Rated Regulations: The History and Intersections of Pornography Laws, Sex Workers and Child Sexual Abuse Material

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Abstract

Pornography law is a complicated issue as it attempts to balance children's online safety and the rights of adults to consume what they want. This research reviews a brief history of pornography and things like the Miller Test to define obscenity and govern what is and is not legal are still used today. This paper reviews laws relating to limiting minor's access to pornography, policing child sexual abuse material and how these laws impact the current pornography industry, as well as how easy it is to enforce those policies. Laws (or the lack thereof) protecting those within the pornography industry are also examined. Additionally how child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is investigated and prosecuted, the profiles and motivations of CSAM viewers, and recommendations for further CSAM law enforcement is explored. This research also explores how pornography laws impact online sex workers and the potential use of online sex workers to help reduce CSAM. The research methodology for this paper was through literature review. The major conclusions and findings include the need for more community-based policing surrounding sex workers, the need for better sex education for minors, specifically regarding pornography, and the need for further research regarding the sex work industry.

Introduction to Pornography Law

Pornography laws seek to regulate obscenity and diminish negative impacts. Obscenity includes things like child pornography, bestiality, and other sexual content deemed harmful. Negative impacts of pornography include when minors, usually teenagers, access pornographic content of any type. This paper examines the effectiveness of these laws and their impacts on adult populations. National standards and recommendations on how sites scan and verify the age of users and content producers are explored. The research findings show that it is difficult to investigate pornography crimes since most of it occurs online. This research also finds that there is limited amounts of information given to teenagers and children on how to protect themselves against pornography exposure and being exploited into being used in pornography.

Currently, several states have attempted to pass multiple laws and policies to limit minors' ability to access porn, mainly using age verification requirements to access pornographic sites with limited success. Nationally, laws focus more on preventing the creation and distribution of child pornography, also known as child sexual abuse material (CSAM) (Hirschtritt et al., 2019). The methods of CSAM crimes make it difficult to catch and prosecute CSAM offenders. Currently, issues center primarily on protecting children without stepping on law-abiding citizens' rights to consume and view erotic content. Some laws, such as age verification laws, are designed to prevent minors from accessing pornography, but also make it harder for adults to access because they need to provide a picture of their ID (something many individuals are unwilling to do) (Ortutay, 2025) To fully understand the context of these issues, it is important to understand the history of pornography law.

History of Porn

Pornography is often defined as "...sexually explicit [images] or videos intended to sexually arouse the viewer" (Jhe et al., 2023). Using this definition, pornography has existed for thousands of years. One of the earliest human carvings dating back nearly 40,000 years, the Venus of Hohle Fels, depicts a woman's torso with exaggerated sexual features) (Museum of Erotic Heritage, 2022). Whenever a new media format is invented, porn is soon to follow. The first regular novel was printed on the printing press in 1640; eight years later, the first widely printed pornographic novel, *Fanny Hill*, would be published (Ford 1999). Film was invented in 1894; in 1896, the first pornographic film was made (Ford 1999). Ultimately, the content of pornographic works has not changed much; topics ranging from sodomy, lesbianism, and orgies to more "typical" vanilla sex scenes have all been popular throughout history (Ford 1999).

In terms of US history, pornography came under fire as "un-American" in the late 1800s (Cusack, 2015). Anthony Comstock, an adamant Christian who believed pornography was a product of Satan, successfully convinced Congress to pass the Comstock Act in 1873. This act banned the mailing of obscene materials, which at the time included information about birth

control and abortion, as well as pornography. Through the Comstock Act, 160 tons of pornography would be burned, and hundreds were prosecuted. The Comstock Act would hold strong for several decades until it came under scrutiny in the 1950s and was largely ignored going forward (Cusack, 2015). However, the Comstock Act has recently regained relevancy, as of 2023, with Republicans citing the act to prevent the mailing of abortion pills in the mail (Kurtzleben, 2024).

Other methods of limiting porn rose during this decade. *Roth v. the United States* allowed for obscenity laws to be passed in 1957. The Supreme Court defined obscenity as anything with "no moral redeeming qualities at all," (Cusack, 2015). A film had to have 51% "redeeming value" to not be considered obscene (Ford 1999). This allowed for massive bans on anything remotely pornographic, but it also created a loophole. Anything that carried any form of story or educational value was allowed. It was through the 50s and 60s that pseudo-documentaries featuring bestiality, incest, homosexuality, and nudist colonies were created as a substitute for traditional pornographic films (Ford 1999). Further loopholes were discovered in obscenity laws, like in the film *Blood Feast* (Ford 1999). *Blood Feast* featured heavy sexual violence with things like razor-bladed studded dildos and dismembered bodies. Since obscenity laws only covered sex, and *Blood Feast* was primarily violent acts, it could not be banned (Ford 1999). Marriage manual films also became popular at this time. These films were marketed as educational tools to enhance married couples' sex lives. Although these films often had a few minutes of explanation followed by "demonstration" and took on a more erotic than educational nature (Eberwein, 1999).

These loopholes demonstrated a need for clearer definition of obscenity. Leading to one of the earliest legal definitions of pornography with *Jacobellis v. Ohio* in 1964 (Cusack, 2015). The ruling did not produce any firm definition of pornography, but did produce the commonly cited quote "I know it when I see it" (Cusack, 2015).

Obscenity Tests

Jacobellis v. Ohio highlighted that defining pornography was exceptionally difficult and the need for a clearer legal definition of pornography. In 1973, *Miller v. California* created the obscenity test used currently (Cusack, 2015). Dubbed the "Miller Test," the test has three requirements that must be fulfilled to qualify as "obscene." The three criteria are: 1) whether the average person would find the work sexually arousing. 2) Whether the work offensively depicts sexual conduct/excretory functions. 3) Whether the work lacks serious literary, artistic, scientific, or political value (Cusack, 2015). All three criteria had to be met for the work to be banned.

Some states added their definitions and stipulations to the Miller Test since some work is designed to be erotic for very specific kinks, and the "average person" may not find the work erotic (Cusack, 2015). All fifty states have some version of the Miller Test, with variations based on the state. For example, Utah's legal definition of obscenity is almost identical to the Miller Test's definition, with the exception that Utah does not include "excretory functions" in its second point (Attire, Conduct, and Entertainment Act, 2018)

There have been attempts in recent years to redefine the legal definition of obscenity. For example, a United States federal bill attempted to redefine obscenity to include "an actual or simulated sexual act or sexual contact…or lewd exhibition of the genitals, with the objective intent to arouse…the sexual desires of a person" (18 USC §§ 2257 & 2257a). Since the US does not allow obscenity, this bill would effectively outlaw pornography if passed (Cusack, 2015).

Other Pornography Laws

The Miller Test and similar legislation have helped identify mainstream pornography in a legal sense, but they fall short when it comes to more miscellaneous forms of erotic content. For example, the Miller Test only covers what "average person[s]" consider erotic, but some porn exists with no nudity occurring. For example, crush films are pornographic films curated for a specific sexual fetish. Crush films generally feature the crushing of small animals or some type of injury to the animal, while featuring no nudity or sex, these films are still intended for viewers to become sexually aroused (Cusack, 2015). Very specific legislation had to be created since a generic definition of outlawing videos of "killing animals" would mean hunting and fishing videos would also be banned (Cusack, 2015). Crush films ultimately led to the creation of the Animal Crush Video Prohibition Act in 2010, which federally banned Crush films (Cusack, 2015).

Laws regarding bestiality videos can also be complicated. In terms of producing bestiality content, in instances where the animal is not harmed (often occurring with larger farm animals), the individual will only be charged with sexual misconduct, which is nationally considered a class A misdemeanor (Cusack, 2015). The animal has to have been physically hurt for it to be a felony (Cusack, 2015). On state levels, 26 states made bestiality a felony charge, with New Mexico being the most recent state to make it a felony in 2022 (Holoyda, 2022).

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

Illegally produced porn is a separate industry, but also highly lucrative. There are many types of illegal porn, but child porn is one of the most popular. In the US, it is estimated to be a 3 billion dollar-a-year industry, with over 5 million children featured in videos (Gurriell, 2021). Of these children, 76% are prepubescent (Cusack, 2015).

Unfortunately, the history of CSAM law is relatively short. For most of US history, CSAM was legal to own and consume. CSAM was not illegalized until 1977 with the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation Act, which only made it illegal to knowingly *produce* porn with someone under the age of 16 (Ward, 2024). The actual owning of CSAM would not be criminalized until 1984 with *New York v. Ferber,* when a bookstore owner was convicted of selling a video of two young boys masturbating (Wright & Miller, 2005). Later, the Child Pornography Act of 1996 banned the virtual production of minors or what "appeared to be a minor," or "gave the impression" of sexual activity of minors. This act was later repealed in 2002 due to a lack of clarity over what "appearing to be a minor" meant (Wright & Miller, 2005).

Similar to regular pornography, defining CSAM is difficult. The current federal definition of CSAM is:

> Child pornography [is] any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor (someone under 18 years of age) Visual depictions include photographs, videos, digital or computer generated images indistinguishable from an actual minor, and images created, adapted, or modified, but appear to depict an identifiable, actual minor," (Citizen's Guide, 2023).

While it seems straightforward, there are gray areas. The definition does not require the child to be engaged in a sexual act, thereby leaving some room for interpretation. For example, parents taking pictures of their children in the bathtub. While generally not considered to be child pornography, it would be up to the viewer to determine if the child is being portrayed in a sexually suggestive manner. Other examples of CSAM gray areas include photographers taking pictures of nudist children in "naturalist" lifestyles or paintings of nude children (Cusack, 2015).

Other issues regarding CSAM definitions arise with simulated pornography. Simulated pornography is animated porn, in most cases, it is not concerning to law officials if it features two fictional cartoon characters or animated adults. Simulated porn generally becomes problematic when it portrays children or animals. 18 USC §§ 2257 and 2257a bans simulated images of *actual* people under the age of eighteen (18 U.S.C §§ 2257-2257A Certifications, 2018). This means, by this statute, sexual situations featuring a simulated child are legal, but only if it is not a *real* child's image morphed onto a simulated body; the face of the simulated child must be fictional (Cusack, 2015). However, under 18 U.S. Code § 1466A, *any* image, even if simulating a fictional character, is illegal to distribute or receive if it features a minor and is deemed obscene. The statute is specific in referencing *obscene* situations, hence why tv shows, like Big Mouth, can depict children in sexual situations because it doesn't meet the obscenity definition. Additionally, since simulated images of children do *not* meet the legal definition of child pornography, they are legal to possess- so long as the individual does not distribute or receive the images via interstate travel (Citizen's Guide to Child Pornography, 2023; Stanley v. Georgia, 1969)

It is important to note that there is a difference between legally produced and distributed pornography featuring consenting adults and pornography that contains children, trafficked persons, or is otherwise illegally produced. However, these two forms often exist in overlapping worlds. Similar to the opioid epidemic and legitimate healthcare, the two are in juxtaposition with each other, but the laws governing one can often influence the other. For example, Pornhub removed 10 million videos from its platform in 2020 in an effort to purge all CSAM from its servers (Valinsky, 2020). While it was beneficial in that much CSAM was removed, it also affected porn produced legally since many videos were mistakenly included in the purge (Valinksy, 2020)

Prosecuting CSAM

It can be difficult to properly research those who view and distribute CSAM because CSAM viewers are often lumped in with sex traffickers, child molesters, and child rapists. The motives and operations of these offenders are very different. Child molesters and rapists generally seek easily physically accessible children. CSAM viewers usually seek out already existing CSAM, they do not need to be in any sustained contact with a minor to offend (Hirschtritt et al., 2019). Unfortunately, officers investigating these crimes often approach all child sex offenses similarly, so evidence can be missed or disregarded (Ferraro, 2005).

Currently, prosecuting child pornography can be difficult. The court case Stanley V Georgia in 1969 upheld people's privacies in their own homes which means warrants are necessary to scan private computers and cellphones (Cusack, 2015). Since child pornography viewers generally view CSAM on their private computers, unless they raise red flags, they are safe from police interference (Cusack, 2015). To further protect themselves against raising suspicions, offenders typically operate completely online with encrypted files

and hidden message boards (Ferraro, 2005). Molesters and other contact offenders, on the other hand, can often be caught in sting operations or general reporting (Ferraro, 2005).

Even with warrants, assembling evidence can be difficult. Computers have IP addresses and also track what sites were visited when and for how long (Ferraro, 2005). However, investigators have to prove which individual was operating the computer at that moment, which can be difficult if it is a communal or shared device. Additional issues arise as information on web pages is often lost if the webpage is updated. Information on the internet is simultaneously permanent and in a delicate existence. Many factors can influence the recovery of information, like the type of network being used, embedded systems, VPNs, and viruses. It can be difficult to find information and even harder to retrieve it. Due to the complexity and various ways offenders store information, successful standardized investigation procedures are difficult to create (Ferraro, 2005).

Current methodologies have been developed to lure offenders to sites. Referred to as "Honeypots," these are sites set up specifically to lure potential CSAM viewers by appearing to advertise CSAM (Gregory, 2018). Once a user accesses this site, police collect their IP address and credit card information and use it to prosecute. Other methodologies target the sites themselves. The FBI's mission, Operation Pacifier, sought to take down one of the largest CSAM sites on the internet, Playpen. Playpen started in 2014, and by 2015, it had over 60,000 registered users, averaging 11,000 people visiting it a week. A foreign nation alerted the FBI about Playpen's US-based IP address, and after investigating, the creator of Playpen, Steven W. Chase, was arrested. The FBI then turned Playpen into a massive honeypot, ultimately leading to the arrest of over 800 people, with 300 of those being US-based (Gregory, 2018).

When CSAM material is discovered, it is impossible to fully scrub the internet of all traces of it. However, steps can be taken to limit distribution. Many pornography sites have attempted to limit CSAM content, Pornhub, for example, "fingerprints" any videos of CSAM or nonconsensual videos on their site. The fingerprinting scans videos using an automatic audiovisual identification system, and any video matching it is removed. Multiple sites and companies have shared fingerprinted videos to remove the content from as many locations as possible. In instances of CSAM, Pornhub also bans the user and forwards their information to Federal agencies (Pornhub, 2025).

CSAM Viewers

The CSAM viewer tends to be a white single male with a job and no serious trauma or antisocial problems (Hirschtritt et al., 2019). There has yet to be a causal relationship established between child porn viewership and child molesting; CSAM viewers are not guaranteed to be child molesters, nor are child molesters guaranteed to be CSAM viewers Cusack, 2015).

CSAM viewers are often believed to be victims of child sexual assault themselves, but it is estimated that only 20% experienced sexual assault as children (Steel et al., 2022). Comparatively, the average population experiences child sexual assault at a rate of 8% to 20% (von Franqué et al., 2023).

Although Americans often believe CSAM viewers to have often been victims themselves, Americans also tend to view CSAM as a serious crime rather than a symptom of trauma (Steel et al., 2022).

The FBI ranks the possession of CSAM as number nine on the list of most severe crimes, right after motor vehicle theft and arson (Steel et al., 2022). Whereas Americans rank possession of CSAM as the third most serious crime (homicide and rape being tied for second and first place) (Steel et al., 2022). This ranking is further reflected in American opinions on how offenders should be treated. Most Americans also supported registering CSAM viewers as sex offenders. In one survey, 90% of Americans also believed that CSAM viewers would go on to commit contact offenses like molestation (Steel et al., 2022). In reality, only 23% of CSAM viewers have also committed contact offenses like molestation (Cohen & Spidell, 2016). In terms of sentencing, only 32% of Americans said they would support treatment over jail time (Steel et al., 2022).

Despite the public's objections, treatment often seems to be the best route to prevent reoffending (Hirschtritt et al., 2019). Cognitive behavioral therapy has been seen to be particularly helpful, although even treatment comes with issues (Hirschtritt et al., 2019). Similar to how investigators fail to approach child sex offenders differently based on their crimes, so too, does treatment for offenders. Those convicted of viewing CSAM often receive the same treatment regime as those who molest children, despite their different motivations (Hirschtritt et al., 2019). This also makes it difficult to collect recidivism data. Based on government data, the recidivism rate for CSAM viewers sits at 4%, but based on self-reports, it is likely closer to 9% (Hirschtritt et al., 2019).

Minors Viewing Porn

Children viewing porn is also a growing problem. It is estimated that 19 to 37% of teens purposefully seek out pornography online, often in response to feelings of loneliness, stress, and lack of sexual connectedness (Jhe et al., 2023). While these feelings are concerning, the actual effects on minors viewing porn have not been researched extensively enough to provide consistent data (Spišák, 2016). Most of the reports regarding teens viewing pornography report correlations; no causations have yet to be established (Jhe et al., 2023).

Currently, the correlation associated with minors and viewing pornography is that adolescents that view porn regularly seem to have a more casual view of sex and may engage in riskier sex (Jhe et al., 2023). Teenagers also may develop unrealistic beliefs regarding sex and what it entails. However, porn viewing among teens is also correlated with increased sexual gratification and more knowledge about sex (Jhe et al., 2023). Sexual gratification is often not addressed in even the most rigorous sex education classes, particularly for women (Eberwein, 1999). The use of porn has been correlated with increased sexual satisfaction for women, and correlation would likely transfer to teenagers (Sommet & Berent, 2023)

Many of the concerns surrounding pornography come from porn often substituting actual sex education (Cook, 2022). Teens echo these sentiments, often feeling frustrated in being told that pornography is bad, but then not being provided any resources to understand sex (Meehan, 2023). While sex education has always been somewhat controversial, the harsh abstinence-only education often taught today only came about in the 90s, just in time for internet porn to fill in the gaps (Clark & Stitzlein, 2018).

Recently, attempts have been made to limit the accessibility of porn to children. Louisiana was the first to pass an age verification law in 2022 (Louisiana Age Verification, 2023). The law required pornography sites to scan an ID to confirm the age of visitors; other states like Mississippi and Utah have also passed similar measures. While it sounds nice, unfortunately, it has an easy workaround. Virtual private networks (VPNs) are easily downloaded (or, in the case of Apple products, only need to have their browser switched to "private" mode to use an IP address hider/VPN). VPNs allow anyone to circumvent age verification laws by making the user appear to be in a location where age verification is not required (Brown, 2024). Any minor would only need to download a VPN to have complete access to porn sites.

Laws Affecting Sex Workers

Sex workers, as defined for this research, is anyone who engages in any form of sexual or erotic activity, this include prostitutes, erotic dancers, and porn actors. Online sex workers are sex workers who primarily operate online, this includes porn actors, cam girls, and phone/text sex line operators. To fully understand how current laws and policies affect the pornography industry, it is crucial to understand how the industry operates. Legal porn is estimated to be a 10 to 12 billion dollar-a-year industry in the US (Escoffier, 2007). It is estimated to employ 20,000 professionals, which includes performers, camera operators, directors, and editors (Escoffier, 2007). Freelancers, who produce content independently through sites like OnlyFans, are estimated to have millions of performers. Within online porn, three major corporations oversee the largest porn sites (Marsh, 2023). Aylo is the largest and owns Pornhub. WGCZ Holdings is the second largest, and its most popular site is XVideos. Gamma Entertainment is the third largest, and it owns AdultTime (Marsh, 2023).

While there are plenty of laws limiting pornography, but very few protecting the industry or the online sex workers it employs. The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) is a government agency responsible for creating policies and protective measures for workers. (OSHA, 2025) Currently, the only state with OSHA-specific statutes relating to pornographic performers is California (California OSHA, 2020). California's standards only cover official "employees"; unfortunately, most performers are considered contract workers and are not covered by the guidelines (California OSHA, 2020).

As it stands, most protections for online sex workers are implemented by the industry itself. The professional porn industry requires STD testing every two weeks, has consent checklists, and takes the lead on age verification for performers (Cook, 2025). Some companies have their own rules that performers must adhere to, for example, Fascination Films requires their performers to wear condoms (Tibbals, 2013). There are also databases to track STDs, primarily HIV, amongst online sex workers (Griffith et al., 2013). All of these measures are not required by law and are implemented by the industry.

Online sex workers also do not have legal protection from some forms of discrimination. For example, many online sex workers face banking discrimination, which is when a bank closes a person's account due to that individual's line of work (Cook, 2025). Even though the Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA) protects against most types of banking discrimination, it does not cover discrimination related

to employment (Equal Credit Opportunity Act, 1974). Adult content creators can be removed by a bank at a moment's notice, simply due to their job.

Likely, this discrimination comes from the stigma that online sex workers face. Pornography actors are often viewed as poorly educated with low self-esteem (Griffith et al., 2013). Banks turn away online sex workers under the belief that they are without reliable income and prone to fiscal irresponsibility. Ironically, most pornography actors make an average of seventy to eighty thousand dollars a year and are generally more educated with better self-esteem than the average American (Griffith et al., 2013).

Online sex workers also often face stolen content, doxxing (threatening to reveal personal information), and physical threats, but are generally hesitant to reach out to law enforcement due to stigma (Armstrong, 2017). This is particularly upsetting since many legal sex workers, particularly online sex workers, are exposed to the darker illegal porn industry (Footer et al., 2020). They are often unwillingly exposed to child pornography, sex trafficking, and other illegal porn (Cook, 2025). Their positionality puts them in the perfect position to partner with police to take down sex offenders (Footer et al., 2020).

Recommendations For CSAM Laws

Unfortunately, there is too much CSAM online to be sorted through and investigated using sheer manpower. That is why AI scanning technologies are so crucial. One example is called THORN (Gurriell, 2021). THORN uses image and video matching to create digital "fingerprints." It then uses these digital fingerprints to match and identify videos of CSAM across multiple platforms (Gurriell, 2021). THORN is particularly helpful since it can target multiple copies of the same video, and it cuts down on the revictimization of children featured in videos because it prevents their image from spreading further (Gregory, 2018).

The best way to stop CSAM viewers is to prevent CSAM from being created altogether. Part of this involves the education of children. Warning children of "stranger danger" is not enough, as individuals can easily become familiar with children, especially in online settings (Ferraro, 2005). This familiarity can lure children into a false sense of security since the online individual no longer seems like a "stranger" and it leaves them open to being take advantage of (Ferraro, 2005). In instances of in-person sexual abuse, the victim knows their abuser in 90% of cases (Center for Disease Control, 2024). In cases of CSAM, it's estimated 65% of children in CSAM know their abusers (Cusack, 2015). While warning children to be wary of strangers is not necessarily a bad thing, it is not enough to protect against sexual abuse or being used to produce CSAM. The best methodology would be a multifaceted program taught in both public education and by parents, that teaches children age-appropriate sexual health education (Ferraro, 2005).
While children may be able to protect themselves in some instances, it still does not prevent the existence of pedophilic desires. While acting on such desires is unacceptable, many minor-attracted persons who have yet to offend feel uncomfortable seeking help (Harper et al., 2018). Unoffending minor-attracted persons often hide their desires, which have been linked to poor impulse control and lower emotional functioning, both of which are linked to higher chances of offending (Harper et al., 2018). Given the public's low desire for treatment of convicted CSAM offenders, intervention before any offense can be the only way minor-attracted persons get help (Harper et al., 2018).

Part of encouraging minor-attracted persons to seek help is reducing the stigma associated with them, particularly those who have not offended. In one study, participants were shown videos of a minor-attracted person speaking about their experiences; afterward, participants were not so condemning of minor-attracted persons (Harper et al., 2018). Participants still found CSAM appalling but were able to be more supportive of minor-attracted persons who do not want to offend (Harper et al., 2018).

Other methods include targeting minor-attracted persons directly. A state-sponsored commercial featuring non-offending minor-attracted persons may encourage other minor-attracted persons to seek help. Additionally, state-funded treatment for minor-attracted persons would benefit minor-attracted persons and cut down on CSAM. Treatments using cognitive therapy approaches, which have been seen to be the most successful in treating minor-attracted persons, that focus on specific sex offenses would be most beneficial (Hirschtritt et al., 2019). Even something as simple as a hotline for minor-attracted persons has been seen to help reduce recidivism(von Franqué et al., 2023).

Recommendations For Minors Viewing Porn

As previously established, current state and federal laws provide a variety of loopholes for minors to access pornography still (Brown, 2024). Unfortunately, there is likely no policy or protection that will completely prevent minors from accessing pornography. Ultimately, an open dialogue between adults and minors about pornography is likely to be the most beneficial (Meehan, 2023). Programs implementing a discussion of pornography and sexual health in general are more likely to discourage viewership than simply being told "Don't watch porn" (Spišák, 2016).

One of the first steps would be altering sex education curricula. In the 90s, many states began to adopt an abstinence-only approach. Abstinence-only education often leads to confusion and shame regarding sex (Clark & Stitzlein, 2018). Teenagers feel they are told not to view pornography, but never have it explained why they should not view it. This can lead teenagers to seek out pornography in an attempt to understand what is "so bad" about it (Spišák, 2016).

One way to implement pornography into the conversation is by having primary care physicians ask teenagers about porn consumption (Jhe et al., 2023). Similar to physicians asking teens if they are sexually active, questions about porn consumption can help alert to any serious problematic viewing habits as well as provide a place for teenagers to discuss porn. Pornography usage can also alert caregivers to potential psychosocial needs of the teenager, like the need for more connection or better education about sex (Jhe et al., 2023).

Adding pornography to school curricula and primary care can also help reduce parental anxiety about talking about it. Many parents get anxious about anyone, including themselves, discussing pornography with their child (Meehan, 2023). This cuts children off from valuable resources and leaves them uneducated. By normalizing discussing porn usage in clinical settings, like doctor's offices, parents may become more confident in discussing the topic themselves (Jhe et al., 2023).

Recommendations For Performers

While no official report has been published, in a series of interviews, multiple online sex workers confessed to coming across CSAM or having fans confess to viewing or producing CSAM (Cook, 2025). Most of the performers contacted the FBI or reported through other channels, but many felt uncomfortable or worried about reporting to law enforcement (Cook, 2025). This concern likely comes from the long, contentious history between the law and sex work (Footer et al., 2020). Many are more than willing to report CSAM to law enforcement, but there are still institutional roadblocks that can discourage them from reporting.

For one thing, online sex workers' income can be precarious. Banking discrimination makes it even worse, with performers finding their funds tied up or losing credit due to being kicked out of their banks (Free Speech Coalition, 2024). For some online sex workers, a lot of their income comes from using social media sites like X to advertise viewers to other sites (Cook, 2025). For many, a blocked account means no income. This motivates online sex workers to not report anything they stumble upon because it can drive unwanted attention to their own social media, resulting in their account being shut down. They have learned it is safer to remain quiet (Cook, 2025).

While it is impossible to mandate what social media platforms can and cannot ban, it is possible to implement laws that reduce financial pressures on online sex workers. One such method is by outlawing banking discrimination based on the individual's choice of employment. This provides more financial security, and online sex workers will not be as fearful to report CSAM. Even if an online sex worker does get their account shut down due to reporting, they still are more financially secure since they run no risk of their bank suddenly dropping them.

There is another common belief among sex workers that the law does not care about them. This is reflected in how often sex worker murder cases are put on the back burner or not seriously investigated by police (Chan, 2020). It sends the message to sex workers that they are not important. Combining community-based policing targeted specifically at sex workers is an easy way to rebuild relationships.

Sex workers' ability to report crimes against themselves improves relationships with officers (Armstrong, 2017). In New Zealand, decriminalized sex work combined with community-based policing enabled sex workers to contact police over issues regarding abuse, payment, and violent crime (Armstrong, 2017). In turn, police officers were able to get the leads on violent crimes and reduce the harm done to sex workers and civilians. This same principle can apply in the United States.

There are a few pornography hotspots in the United States, like California, LAS Vegas, and Florida. The largest hotspot is in the San Fernando Valley in California where 71% of American-based professional porn is made (Lüdering, 2018). Officers in these hot spots could easily host workshops educating sex workers on their rights and how to report should sex workers see something concerning. Officers in these areas should also receive special in-depth training on pornography laws and how to respond to sex worker-specific issues. An effort by officers, even in just these hotspot areas, can increase trust in police. Increased trust would lead to more tips about CSAM or other pornography law violations.

Conclusion

Pornography is a complex issue with no easy answers. Despite pornography having existed for centuries, it is still often seen as negative when it does not need to be (Jhe et al., 2023). Its prevalence is a reminder of humanity's natural interest in the sensual and erotic. It has transcended into all forms of media, yet it has increasingly come under fire in recent years as states attempt to pass regulatory measures on pornography, like age verification laws. Ironically, even with legislation in the works, pornography can still be hard to define. The Miller Test works for mainstream pornography, but additional measures are needed to fully define all types of pornography.

While consensual pornography is a flourishing field, unfortunately, CSAM also exists in a similar space. Through educational programs, the most harmful forms of pornography, like CSAM, can be reduced. Teaching children how to best advocate for themselves and warning them about potential dangers can help reduce more CSAM being produced.

For the minor-attracted persons who seek out CSAM, it is important to ensure help is available. Treatment for minor-attracted persons and other sex offenders can reduce the number of repeat offenders and new offenders. While often against an individual's initial reaction, approaching nonoffending minor-attracted persons with compassion and support is the best path forward to reducing CSAM.

Finally, through healing relationships between sex workers and the government and banking industries, the potential for fast and effective reporting of CSAM is opened up. Sex workers do not want children in their spaces, and understand better than most the harms of CSAM (Cook, 2025). However, due to the stigma sex workers face, it can be difficult for them to come forward. Additional research on how to best help sex workers is needed to determine the best path forward in repairing relationships between sex workers and oppressive agencies.

There is no one solution to issues regarding pornography, and misinformation regarding it flourishes in our modern era. Unfortunately, this misinformation only further fuels policies and opinions that can work to increase unethical pornography practices. Continued research is crucial to understanding how to implement better pornography laws.

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"If you're reading this message, have a nice day!": Characterizing Online Kindness in a Virtual Lofi Hip Hop Community

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Abstract

Lofi hip hop is a musical genre formed by mellow, noninvasive loops of chilled-out drums, guitars, pianos, and assorted background textures. Interestingly, lofi hip hop (often shortened to 'lofi') listeners are overwhelmingly situated in online networking platforms such as YouTube and Discord, allowing for global connection. These online lofi community spaces carry a reputation for an apparent endless positivity towards other users. To characterize how users interact within the most populated lofi hip hop Discord server, I conducted a mixed-methods research to survey N = 31 users about their engagement and perspectives on the community and conduct in-depth interviews with n = 12 survey respondents. Through quantitative and content analysis, previous findings on the community can be affirmed and further distinguished by nuanced prosociality, a cosmopolitan orientation towards intercultural communication, the application of imagined community theory to a digital space, attitudes of growth and learning, and the recognition of kindness as a necessity in everyday life.

Introduction and Literature Review

I stumbled upon lofi hip hop when I was a freshman in high school. I was on the search for background noise to fill the gaps between myself and my–at the time, strenuous–algebra homework, and was drawn towards a YouTube livestream by a thumbnail of a diligent student that appeared to be focused on her fictional homework (Figure 1). As soon as the livestream loaded, I felt a wave of peace wash over me, parallel to the gentle beats playing out of the grainy speakers of my school-issued laptop. Looking back, I always found comfort in knowing that tens of thousands of students all around the world were listening along with me.



Figure 1.

To contextualize this work, lofi hip hop is the child to the parent genres of low-fidelity and hip hop music. Low-fidelity music refers to music that has imperfections and is crowded with sound, such as the static originating from cheaper consumer electronic music equipment (Schafer 1977). Gradually, amateur producers creating sounds in their bedrooms began to subvert the label of low-fidelity into "lo-fi". The previously considered imperfections of tape hiss and fuzzy sound quality became iconic to the genre, and cemented the producer and their music as authentic (Vasich 2024). Thus, lo-fi music enabled the everyday listener to produce their own music. This "do-it-yourself" style of musical autonomy–enabled by cassette culture that allowed for the trading of produced music at smaller shows–was popular in the 1990s and early 2000s through subgenres of punk, rap, and R&B music, and lo-fi music joined the movement with no difficulty. Interactions between lo-fi and hip-hop music took place in the 2000s in tandem with the Roland SP-303 and 404 samplers that enabled producers to chop up and run their audio through a "LO-FI" filter to make the sound grainier in the finished product. Sharing the raw and rhythmic qualities of lo-fi and hip-hop music, lo-fi hip hop now had room to grow as a genre. Lofi hip hop, as it now resides in almost exclusively online spaces such as YouTube, Discord, and radio websites (Vasich 2024), has evolved into the direction of background music and is especially favored by students. Whereas lo-fi hip hop used to be composed of lyrics and amateur instrumentals, lofi hip hop is now characterized by slow, looping melodies and simple drum rhythms that serve as a layer of aural focus for late-night study sessions and/or moments of relaxation.

Online spaces have allowed for lofi hip hop to fulfill several purposes: the background nature of the music attracts listeners trying to balance a heavy workload (Landarini 2023; Vasich 2024; Winston and Saywood 2019; Zheng 2023), allows users to diarize their experiences in the comment sections (Gamble 2024), and helps relieve anxiety and stress (Dsouza et al. 2024). Underneath these wavy and downtempo beats exists a

foundation of "do-it-yourself" ethics (Landarini 2023) ripe for the young amateur producer with access to YouTube tutorials that heighten their "DIY authenticity" (Bennett 2018), nostalgia for a time that the listener did not necessarily experience (Winston and Saywood 2019), and a deep-rooted emphasis on connection (Vasich 2024). The most popular online source of lofi hip hop is the Lofi Girl YouTube channel, which hosts several "around-the-clock" livestreams of the Lofi Girl and other characters engaged in studying while different tracks cycle through the listener's own headphones. These Lofi Girl livestreams host tens of thousands of consistent listeners, the majority of whom are students tuning in to gain some focus for whatever work they are completing. But, what takes place in these online spaces that allow for mass, globalized, communication?

The overwhelmingly kind and connection-inclined nature of the online interactions is what is most captivating about the listeners and larger lofi hip hop community. Online music communities have the potential to be just as important in one's life as a place-based community (Guimarães Jr. 2005; Jenkins 2006; Waldron 2018), and the Lofi Girl Discord server serves as a perfect example of such importance. Prosociality, a way of describing other-oriented kindness, has been a staple of the Internet since the days of the early discussion forums, where users could participate in helping others from anywhere in the world (Sproull and Arriaga 2007; Sproull et al. 2013). Discord is a social networking platform that allows for private messaging with others, but also affords users the ability to join larger servers, or customizable online spaces that allow for millions of users across the globe to communicate with one another. While some theorists support the power of virtual communities, others believe that online spaces offer a "thin" form of intimacy and are incomparable to real communities without direct interaction (Jamieson 2013; Komito 2010). Excitingly, adapting the theoretical approaches of imagined communities and cosmopolitanism towards the lofi hip hop community allows for a more positive view of the structure and connections between intercultural users.

Through introducing these theoretical perspectives now and returning to them later, my hope is that the reader will be able to understand the Discord platform and the Lofi Girl Discord server as an imagined community that acts in a cosmopolitan manner. Later on, I will demonstrate that these frameworks affirm the findings on the individual perspectives of community members that go on to shape the community's larger culture.

Imagined communities, as argued by Benedict Anderson, are large groups of people within a nation's borders that feel a sense of unity and solidarity with one another as the result of print capitalism–namely, the printing press (1982). As the result of having a shared vernacular through which individuals feel connected to one another, a sense of group identity emerges, transforming a given collective into an "imagined community". The label of "imagined" stems from the notion that group members may never meet one another, so they retain their anonymity while sharing a group identity. While Anderson penned this term in relation to political science and developing nationalism, his ideas can be connected to digital communication and virtual communities. John Callahan, a digital communications strategist, argues that Anderson's notion of imagined communities is fractured and reforged through digital communication, as there is a lower level of anonymity due to the available personal information that online users can gain access to with little time invested (2020). Further, the limitless ability to publish one's thoughts online impacts the way community members exchange information. In the current examination, the lofi hip hop community can be considered a digital imagined community, as community members operate within a shared language space that allows them to develop and sustain a group identity. In this case, it is an identity of overwhelming prosociality and tranquility. This theoretical application is exciting, as working to understand digital communities through this lens will help us to understand how individuals participate in the lofi hip hop community, and how it may differ from their real communities. One of these avenues is best explored through the theoretical application of cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism, as contended by Nigel Rapport, focuses on the existence of "world cultures," and urges humanity to step away from a territorial understanding of cultural identities, to embrace a wider breadth of "thin" connections that enable vast intercultural communication, and to recognize that individuals determine what is worthwhile for their lives, not their collective identities (2012). Other theorists such as Ulf Hannerz propose that cosmopolitanism is first demonstrated by a willingness to engage with Others and is followed by the creation of a shared and respectful space between cultures (1990). So, how can cosmopolitanism function in online spaces, where international communication can happen in a matter of seconds? Some believe that virtual groups cannot form deep emotional connections required of cultural affiliations (Komito 2010) and virtual group membership could erode local cultural identities (Baltezrevic 2019), but other theorists argue that the thin connections afforded by digital intercultural exchange are aligned with the tenets of cosmopolitanism (Hall 2018) and have exciting implications for youth intercultural communication (Hull et al. 2010) and personal identity performance (Lingel

2017). Lofi hip hop community members will provide a meaningful space to examine cosmopolitan elements of communication, as the virtual space in which they communicate is highly globalized.

While the prosocial lofi hip hop community can also be understood through the above theoretical lenses, these conceptual applications have not yet been recorded in an academic setting. Thus, a virtual ethnography was warranted to understand how the cultural backgrounds of individuals all interact to form the Lofi Girl Discord server. Like all ethnographic fieldwork, virtual ethnography requires the researcher to be embedded in the social world of their subjects (Forberg and Schilt 2023), but virtual ethnography further requires a deep technological literacy that allows them to properly navigate interactions in their respective virtual communities (Martin-Varisco 2007). Once acquired, the virtual community can be duly characterized. While previous scholarship on lofi hip hop has characterized user interactions surrounding the YouTube livestreams and playlist videos (Gamble 2024; Landarini 2023; Vasich 2024; Wang 2020; Winston and Saywood 2019), the opportunity to deeply study this virtual lofi hip hop community on the Discord platform has not yet been explored.

Before diving into the analysis of the specific Lofi Girl Discord server, it is necessary to describe the general layout and structure of Discord servers, and how different users interact with one another. Servers are private–accepting users via invitation–or public virtual spaces on Discord that allow for mass communication among online users. Whereas Discord allows users to send friend requests to one another in order to start privately messaging, server communication is centered on users from around the globe that do not need to be registered as friends conversing in a public forum setting. As servers become established communities, server owners and moderators have the ability to create more text channels to allow users more freedom in the types of conversations that they can have: many servers have one or more "general chat" channels that do not follow any sort of interest, specific chat channels where users can gather to discuss a certain topic such as art, video games, books, and so on, depending on the nature of the server itself. Discord servers may also contain voice channels (where users can hear and see one another–provided that they choose to unmute themselves and turn their cameras on, which is not required of voice call channels), radio channels (where users tune into a radio program established by the server), announcement channels, technical assistance channels, new member introduction channels, and whatever else the owner and/or moderators deem necessary for the success of the server. As demonstrated, Discord servers can offer a multitude of unique methods for communication with other users around the world. But, who are these users, and are there any differences between them?

There are three main types of users, with subcategories that can be created as desired by the server's leadership. First, the creator of the server is regarded as the "owner" of the digital space, as they laid virtual claim to the name and structure that they hoped will house future users. They have the power to create chat/voice/radio channels, and to promote other users to an administrative "moderator" status. A moderator hierarchy is established based on the amount of time that they have moderated a given community. The moderators are more responsible for the daily management of chats between users and resolution of technical issues that others may experience. The job of a moderator is to ensure that all users are acting in line with the community guidelines created by the owner and moderators. Last but certainly not least, members are the heart of the server. In large, public servers such as the Lofi Girl server, there are hundreds of thousands of members that gather in this virtual space to communicate. As for their specific behaviors, members can engage in casual conversation in the general chat, ask for help in academic chat channels, post pictures in the photography topic chat channel, and so on. Many larger servers opt to use leveling systems as a way to distinguish the most active users from the least. In the Lofi Girl server, all users gain levels by sending messages into any chatroom. As users level up, they can unlock specific privileges related to sharing files and images, and can unlock an exclusive chatroom at Level 10 (which, in my estimations, would take several months of extensive daily interaction to attain). Following a description of my methodological approach, all will be explained in regards to how members interact with one another.

Lastly, readers may notice by this point that a social hierarchy has the potential to exist within Discord servers, as everyday users can obtain different roles and privileges. Indeed, moderators and owners have more social capital (Bourdieu 1983) and power within the server structure, so server membership is organized by power. Though, the degree to which higher users use their power over other users depends entirely on the server and what is considered to be normal to each virtual space. In the Lofi Girl space, moderators–their status can be understood through the red-colored text of their display name–are often seen joining members in casual conversation, and may provide them with encouragement for their schoolwork as well. In fact, communicating with Lofi Girl moderators is how this project came to be possible.

Methods

Discord Platform

I had reached out to several Discord moderators to assess the feasibility of this project long before I started recruiting server users. Out of the several moderators I had messaged, only one responded to my inquiry and allowed me to post my message in the #study-room and #university channels. Throughout the process of my ethnography, I kept close contact with this moderator, who uses the pseudonym of Joseph Joestar–a popular character from the classic manga series JoJo's Bizarre Adventure, which emphasizes the nostalgia central to lofi hip hop (Vasich 2024; Winston and Saywood 2019). I posted daily recruitment messages in two channels between January to February 2025. N = 31 users participated in the online survey, and a subset of n = 12 of these users were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their participation in the Lofi Girl Discord server. The data of one participant was excluded, as they did not properly fill out the informed consent document.

As highlighted in the literature on cyberethnography, one's digital presentation of self and technological literacy is deeply crucial to the progress of one's digital field research. So, I crafted a profile photo that mimics the Lofi Girl, used emojis in my writing, and would message users in lower-case writing, as is common on the server (Figure 2). Further present in this image are several key features of communication with others common to the lofi hip hop community: sharing about one's upcoming academic stressors, others chiming in with positivity, and offering advice to others–in this case, to my ethnographic efforts.

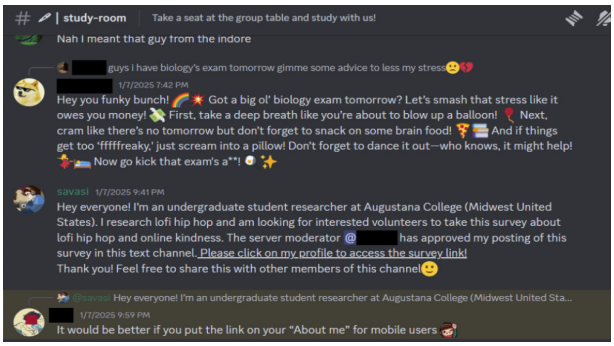


Figure 2.

Survey Stage

After providing informed consent, users selected answers to questions about their history of listening to lofi hip hop, how they engage with other users in virtual lofi hip hop spaces, self-report questions that were used to form a "prosociality score," demographic information, their interest in being interviewed, and whether or not they wanted to receive a copy of their responses. Further, there were several short answer questions that allowed users to describe how they would describe the lofi hip hop community, how they view the "spirit" of the community, what kindness means to them and their cultural background, positive and negative memories with the community, what they believe the "unspoken rules" of the community to be, and if their perspectives on kindness have changed as a result of being a member of the Lofi Girl Discord server.

While posting recruitment messages that I continued to condense in the allotted text channels, I interacted with other users in a variety of manners with a two-fold approach of striking up genuine conversation and informing them of the research. In this pursuit, I joined group voice calls, played online minigames, helped to answer school-related questions, and communicated with any user that interacted with my recruitment messages. Through this participant observation, I both received and passed forward the online kindness that I studied!

Interview Stage

Although participants were given the opportunity to engage in individual and focus group interview sessions, all n = 12 interview participants elected to participate in one-on-one private messaging, citing comfort and privacy. Interviews, on average, lasted up to an hour and a half. Quotes used throughout the findings sections will be attributed to each survey respondent via identification number or de-identified pseudonym. There is overlap between respondents and interviewees, as the qualitative portion of the project used a within-subjects

design to recruit interviewees. Given that they had not chosen a pseudonym at the time of survey completion, their original identification number will be retained for their quoted short answer responses.

Findings

Quantitative Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Gender Identity	Frequency	% of Respondents
Man	16	53.3
Woman	9	30
Trans Man	1	3.3
Trans Woman	0	0
Non-Binary	3	10
Other	1	3.3
Age (in years)	Average	Standard Deviation
N = 30	23.53	5.05

The demographic information of gender identity and age provide important insight into this sample of lofi hip hop listeners. 54 percent of the sample identified as men, and the average age was 23.53 years (Table 1). Further, the majority of respondents were European (36.7 percent), followed by North American participants (26.7 percent), and there were select respondents from Asia (13.3 percent), Africa (10 percent), Oceania (6.7 percent), and South America (3.3 percent) countries. Recruitment was successful across the globe, demonstrating the international composition of the Lofi Girl Discord server, which allowed for the gathering of unique perspectives and cultural backgrounds (Figure 3).

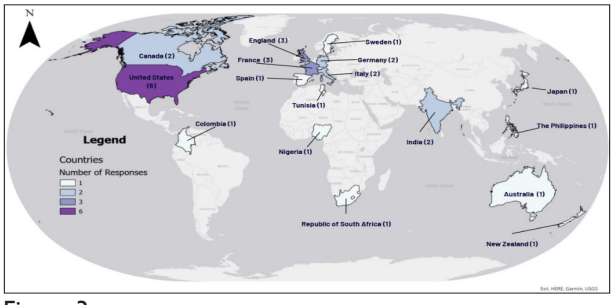


Figure 3.

The majority of survey participants indicated that, on average, they listen to less than a single hour of lofi hip hop music per week. Just behind them, the next highest frequency of time spent listening per week was between one and three hours. Balancing out the lower amounts of hours listened per week, a majority of survey respondents indicated that they had been listeners of lofi hip hop for several years. In terms of the time of day in which respondents listened to lofi hip hop, the later hours of the day (in other words, when school is out) were rated as more popular (Table 2). Notably, the Flexible Time option was created in retrospect to account for several users that selected "Other" and wrote that they listened to lofi hip hop whenever they were doing homework. In this context, I hypothesize these homework sessions to be taking place in the afternoon to late-night range. The finding of the average age being 25.53 years in conjunction with a longer listener history of the respondents, listening to lofi hip hop for several years could indicate that some of the survey respondents have recently concluded their studies at a university setting.

Table 2. Listenership History and Time of Engagement

	Hours Listened Per Week	
	Frequency	% of Respondents
<1 hour	9	30
1-3 hours	8	26.7
4-7 hours	3	10
8-11 hours	4	13.3
12-15 hours	2	6.7
15+ hours	3	10
	Listenership Length	
	Frequency	% of Respondents
<1 month	2	6.7
1-5 months	3	10
6-11 months	2	6.7
1-2 years	4	13.3
3-4 years	4	13.3
4-5 years	9	30
6+ years	4	13.3
	Time of Day When Listening	
	Frequency	% of Respondents
Morning	1	3.3
Afternoon	6	20
Evening	7	23.3
Late-Night	8	26.7
Flexible Time	7	23.3

Note: Values do not sum to 100% because n = 2 participants skipped both questions.

These findings could be interpreted as enduring listeners that tune in for shorter bursts of time when they are

engaging in focused work, or just need background music as they complete other tasks. In terms of where the respondents listen to lofi hip hop, 40 percent of respondents indicated that YouTube was their most frequently used source of lofi hip hop, with a two-way 23 percent tie between Music Apps and Discord Music bots thereafter. The proportion of YouTube sources could indicate a potential loyalty to the origins of the Lofi Girl, the desire to engage in livestream chatting, or to study along with the Lofi Girl in a parasocial manner.

To understand the appeal of listenership, I was curious to see how users would regard their listenership if given several archetypes to choose from: background listener, semi-active listener, active listener, organizer, producer, moderator, and 'none of these options accurately describe me'. An overwhelming 70 percent of participants view their membership as that of a "background listener" rather than any other type of engagement that was offered. Secondly, 10 percent chose the "moderator" label in line with their social responsibilities to regulate the online community. A three way tie at 6.7 percent between semi-active, active listener, and "none of these options accurately describe me" rounded out the rest of the sample, further pointing to the fact that most users demonstrate a passive engagement with the musical genre.

When asked to choose three criteria that mattered the most to them about listening to lofi hip hop music, a majority of respondents selected that they listen to lofi hip hop to "relax/chill out", "focus on their tasks", and to "enjoy the music" (Table 3). In conjunction with the respondents mostly identifying as "background listeners," selecting listening reasons that combine relaxation and focus appear congruent with one another, and could further be explained by a survey item that inquired respondents about their occupation.

Table 3. Reasons for Listening

Presented Reasons	Frequency	% of Respondents
To relax/chill out	23	76.7
"To focus on whatever task I am working on"	18	60
To enjoy the music	15	50
"To escape from the outside world"	8	26.7
"To talk with others in the lofi hip hop community"	4	13.3
"To learn how to produce lofi hip hop music"	0	0
To leave comments on videos	0	0
Other	1	3.3

Note: Respondents selected at most three answers, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

When asked to list their occupation(s), 70 percent of the sample responded by saying that they were students, and many of the additional jobs that they had listed revolve around some form of computer work (e.g. game developer, editor, moderator, etc.) or music-selection ability in their environment (e.g. barista, musician), which could allow for potential access to lofi hip hop music throughout the workday.

The final piece of survey data is what I have labeled the 'prosociality score'. Taking inspiration from several psychological measures, I created a 5-point Likert scale that asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with questions such as "I am considerate to the needs of others," "I am kind to people I do not personally know," "I am motivated to be kind when I see others acting with kindness," and so on. The prosociality measure consisted of 14 items and could be summed to determine a level of prosociality per participant. The average score was 50.63 out of a total possible score of 70, and scores ranged from 36 to 62. Importantly, three items were reverse-scored to account for testing fatigue, so a score in which a participant reports the highest possible prosociality is 62. Taken together, the average score of 50.63 compared to the ceiling prosocial score of 62 indicates that this sample of lofi hip hop listeners were more prosocial than an expected population average. It is critically important to note that this prosociality measure was created for this study, and these findings would benefit from future replication efforts. I conducted a reliability analysis to ensure that my scale was accurate in measuring prosociality and received a Cronbach's Alpha of $\alpha = 0.761$, indicating that I met an acceptable threshold for scale validity and reliability. My aim in creating this measure was to create a path for statistically

testing relationships between a participant's level of prosociality in connection with the amount of time they spend listening to lofi hip hop per week, as well as how long they have been listeners of the genre. I hypothesized that there would be positive relationships between both measurements of time and level of prosociality, but was surprised to find that neither the amount of lofi hip hop that a respondent listens to per week nor the length of time they have been listeners were significantly correlated to their level of prosociality (Spearman's p = -0.279, p = 0.143; Spearman's p = -0.351, p = 0.067), although there was a slight trend towards significance in prosociality and length of listenership. Further, there was a slight trend but no significant relationship between the amount of lofi hip hop listened to per week and how long respondents had been listeners to the genre: Spearman's p = 0.361, p = 0.064.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while the sampled lofi hip hop listeners tend to be more prosocial people, their temporal relationship to lofi hip hop has little to do with their prosocial behavior. Then, are lofi hip hop spaces better at drawing in more prosocial users? This could be the case, as other survey results indicated that the sample is full of students using lofi hip hop as a productivity tool to strengthen their efforts to complete their homework. Being kind to others in a similar situation as oneself could certainly contribute to the formation of this prosocial community. To explain the stories in between all of the numbers, I looked towards the qualitative portion of my research to understand the lived experience of listeners from around the world.

Qualitative Findings and Discussion

The friendliest community on Discord. Across the internet, the lofi hip hop community has been hallmarked as the "friendliest community on Discord," as can be seen in the server profile below–and further paralleled by the upcoming analysis of imagined community and cosmopolitanism (see Figure 4). Through survey short answer questions and in-depth interviews, I was fortunate to gain insight into the different perspectives of users across the global lofi hip hop community. I coded different thematic patterns in all of their answers and identified four overarching themes that shape a listener's environmental and individual interactions with lofi hip hop community: Positive Environmental Characteristics, Interaction with Others, Positive Relationship with Lofi Hip Hop Music, and Nuanced Perspectives on Kindness.

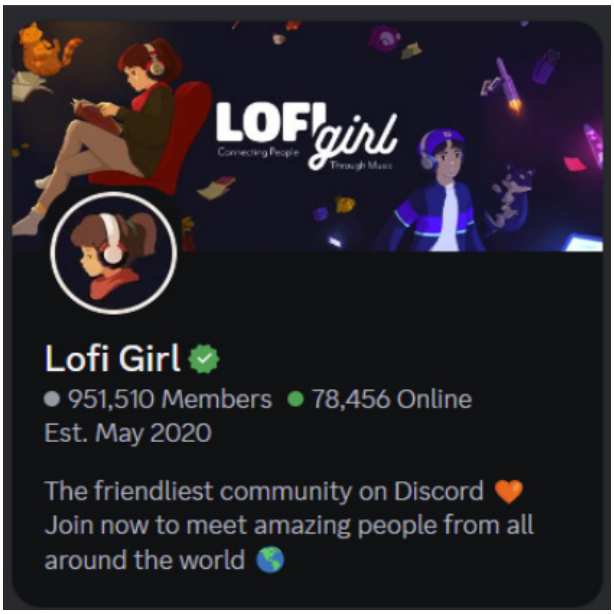


Figure 4.

Positive Environmental Characteristics. Some of the most frequently occurring themes related to the traits of this digital community center around the Lofi Girl Discord server being (1) a chill space, (2) a positive space, (3) a place where they can ask for and receive help–especially in student chat channels–from other users, (4) an environment where members look out for one another, and most occurring of all, (5) a place to connect with other people. Several responses from the qualitative portions of the survey and interviews support these ideas, as users shared:

1. "Whether it's for studying, working, or just relaxing, spending several hours each week listening feels like stepping into a calm and welcoming space." -Respondent 27
2. "When I feel down, or feelt [sic] down and come over to lofi to find community in the people I've come to love and appreciate I always find it." -Respondent 12
3. "And the fact that a stranger is willing to help me with however I may be feeling or whatever I need help with because they've lived or are living it is a precious thing to me" -MJ
4. "lofi servers focues [sic] on community building and cares about indvidual's [sic] emotions" -Hellcat
5. "I became more humble and compassionate when I became a mod[erator] in lofi girl" -Respondent 4

While the labels of "chill" and "positive" spaces could overlap, I elected to look for themes of relaxation

and ease to characterize a participant's description as "chill," and themes of experiencing relief from negativity to mark a response as "positive". As can be seen from only a small handful of respondents, server members strongly feel that the lofi hip hop environment is a prosocial space that is ready to lend support whenever someone is in need.

As I continued to try my hand at recruiting community members to participate in my survey, my recruitment messages gained more interest, and Joseph Joestar, the moderator that allowed me to even begin my work in the first place, would highlight my messages in the university and study-room chat channels, providing me with a bump of credibility. In fact, Joseph Joestar has remained involved and keenly interested to help spur my project forward. He sent me a list of contacts that I should reach out to within the Lofi Girl server and specifically instructed me not to say that he had passed their name along. In his words, "I like to help people when possible but without others knowing". In addition to receiving help from moderators, many of my respondents took it upon themselves to recruit more users for my project. One interviewee, using the pseudonym Atlas Clancy, concluded our interview by messaging, "I hope this helps with your research. I'll definitely send the [recruitment] link if and when I make new friends. If you need anything else, just send a message". Joseph Joestar and Atlas Clancy owe me nothing: I did not know them prior to the interview, I have never met either of them, but they are willing to share my research project with other community members because they simply wanted to help. I find it humbling to keep in mind that these interactions all took place in a digital environment created for listeners of a relaxing music genre that helps them study. In addition to the positive characteristics of the Lofi Girl server environment, respondents also highlighted the community's value of connection as being important to their continued engagement.

Interaction with Others. Several features make up interactions between lofi hip hop users: (1) directly helping another user/being directly helped, (2) intercultural exchange, (3) interpersonal positivity, (4) recognizing users in other spaces/times, (5) noticing and passing forward small acts of kindness, (6) a desire to understand the motivations of others, and (7) the awareness of commonly-shared student status. These characteristics can be best understood through several qualitative snippets:

1. "I can come in at night when I might have mixed emotions and uncertainties and know there will be people in the channel with open arms and hearts to give <3" -Respondent 12
2. "There's a lot of folks across different timezones here so there's always someone up or something to join in" -Dann
3. "everyone I've interacted with has been nothing but inclusive, welcoming, and it's a place where I can interact with people without feeling like I'm butting in" -Respondent 5
4. "[Describing a positive memory] chatting with other friendly people and feeling like we are becoming friends, and recognizing them on several times and greeting each other" -Respondent 1
5. "[Lofi hip hop] has made me more aware of the value of small acts of kindness. Seeing how positive and encouraging the community is reminds me to carry that energy into other areas of my life" -Respondent 26
6. Displayed below.
7. "I've seen a lot of people who are like 'oh I have this final paper due in an hour. Wish me luck' and the responses are like 'dude that's so real' or just general good wishes" -Connor

Perfectly encapsulating all of these qualities into a single quote, a survey respondent replied to a question about how they would react to someone sending a negative message into a lofi hip hop space by saying:

> "I find the phrase "don't feed the trolls" appropriate. But I also try to invite them into the space rather then [sic] reject them from the space, to invite them to share what is really at heart." -Respondent 12

Truly, is this not emblematic of the rich, prosocial culture of the lofi hip hop community? This respondent, when faced with a potential bad actor in a sea of online communication, wants not to cast them away from the community, but to instead offer them time and space to understand what they are experiencing. Thus, interpersonal interaction between Lofi Girl members can extend the wholesome, other-oriented patterns of the environment. At large, the social environment of the Lofi Girl Discord server is rife with prosociality. Whether or not users have ever interacted before does not appear to matter in terms of the kindness that they are both sharing and receiving from others. This server appeals to both outsiders and insiders with a reputation of positivity and mutual aid. These features can be understood as promoting participation in the Lofi Girl server for even the most introverted of members, as there is no social pressure to even communicate with others at all. Several respondents–thinking back to the background listeners–wrote about how communication is easier through this virtual community than in real life,

especially through the fact that online interaction has no expectations of face-to-face interaction, nor extended conversations. Users are free to weave in and out of social interactions, empowering them to engage with the community in whatever style they see fit.

To understand how lofi hip hop users may interact with others in face-to-face settings, it is important to recall that online interaction offers them several elements that differ from standard interpersonal interactions. As previously explored, online prosociality emerged from the practice of individuals being able to help others in accessible settings that transcend time zones and language barriers. However, extrapolating the interaction styles of the lofi hip hop users outwards to their "IRL" communities may not always appear as seamless as one would expect. The Lofi Girl Discord server is a place where users can engage in prosocial acts, perhaps for one reason, because they may be too reserved to freely offer kindness to strangers in face-to-face settings. As best captured in an interview, a participant named Storm shared the following:

> "yes, i enjoy talking with people here just because theres no real harm to it; after all, if i dont enjoy their presence, i can simply tell them that and move on and likely never cross paths with them again. theres no need to awkwardly dance around it."

This snippet demonstrates the ease of which users can converse with one another. There are little to no expectations that are enforced in online conversations, whereas different social norms are present in face-to-face interactions. That being said, future interviews can stand to include more questions regarding the difference between real-world and virtual communication in lofi hip hop community members.

Positive Relationship with Lofi Hip Hop Music. In terms of how individuals see their own place in this virtual environment, the members of the Lofi Girl Discord server can be continually characterized by a positive relationship to the musical genre that extends past task completion, as well as nuanced perspectives on kindness. In addition to the productivity and work-related benefits of listening to lofi hip hop, respondents also highlighted several other important emotional experiences that they encounter when listening to the music: (1) creativity, (2) peace/stress reduction, (3) positive memories, and (4) the versatile ability of the genre to match their interests and mood:

1. [Listening while drawing] "I started to let go my hand holding my pencil and described my emotions with every trace" -Respondent 7
2. "Lofi hip hop music calm down my mind when I am anxious, depressed or just overwhelmed" -Fran
3. "[My grandmother] will always play lofi hip hop on the television while we play board games or cook" -Respondent 21
4. "There's also lofi for different feelings such as sadness or happiness. I feel now you could search up a specific lofi playlist or livestream and you could be able to find it easily." -Atlas Clancy

Several respondents even described lofi hip hop music as providing them with a method of coping with (1) loss and (2, 3) intense stress:

1. "I lost two of my grandparents last year right around the same time, and lofi music has helped me cope with that." -Atlas Clancy
2. "there are those lofi songs that are mixed with background rain song; that makes me ease up both physically and emotionally" -Hellcat
3. "Listening to Lofi music has helped me heal faster" -Respondent 5

While the point of entry into lofi hip hop listenership is often to achieve focus and productivity amidst a towering stack of homework, listeners often find deeper value and heightened emotion regulation through this genre of music, which in turn could increase the likelihood of continued listenership and membership in the associated virtual community.

Nuanced Perspectives on Kindness. Server members were asked about their own perspectives on kindness with the goal of comparing their answers to features of the larger lofi hip hop community. Several key understandings of kindness emerged through the qualitative portion of the survey and interview sessions, and in specific, kindness includes the practices of: (1) taking the perspectives of others, (2) sharing kindness with others–especially without expecting anything in return, (3) treating others how you would like to be treated, (4) demonstrating respect, (5) accepting unkind others with the goal of understanding them, (6) loving others, and (7) the roots of one's kindness from their cultural background. To demonstrate these functions of kindness, let us examine more qualitative highlights:

1. "[A feature of kindness] that's really important to me is being able to see the world from different perspectives and points of view, and really trying to understand how other people might feel about things" -John
2. "It's about helping when you can and treating people with fairness and compassion without expecting anything in return." -Respondent 28

3. "You can't be kind if you don't love your neighbour as yourself." -Respondent 7
4. "I'm very open and flexible when it comes to cultural differences and seeing all as valid and understanding the impact [kindness] has on individuals lives to be seen and respected" -Connor
5. "People will make mistakes, but it feels better to communicate it first rather than react and potentially shame" -Jester CE
6. "[kindness is] going out of your way to make others feel valued, supported, and loved" -Respondent 25
7. "Stories of helping strangers and being blessed (if I may put it like that) are told to us" -MJ

As can be understood from a variety of Lofi Girl members from around the world, individual perspectives on kindness are not as simple as just being amicable with others, rather, one must truly intend to help others and respect their personhood. Are these definitions of kindness similar to the regular behaviors of the lofi hip hop community? If you are experiencing déjà vu, you are correct! In fact, the shared community and individual values can be demonstrated through a respondent's blending of kindness with an act of community regulation in the face of a negative interaction:

> "Approaching the situation with empathy, acknowledging their feelings or frustrations, but also setting boundaries to maintain the community's peaceful and welcoming vibe" -Participant 29

It appears that the relationship between the regular behaviors of the lofi hip hop community are synonymous with the individual members' definitions of kindness. In other words, the prosocial nature of the Lofi Girl Discord server welcomes like-minded individuals, who continue to contribute kindness and positivity to the space, continuing the effervescent cycle of kindness that benefits all members. Just as many users tune into lofi hip hop radios/playlists to gain study benefits and end up with a deeper appreciation for the music, Lofi Girl server members can enter a kind community to interact with other positive members and find themselves advancing acts of compassion and generosity towards others from around the world. In this process, does the Lofi Girl server become a place where all of the international and multicultural uniquities of each user are appreciated and formed into a larger cultural image?

Imagined Community, Cosmopolitanism and the Lofi Girl Discord Server

Imagined Communities are group identities that emerge from having a shared language that is shared via print capitalism (Anderson 1982), and this theory can be updated via the use of digital technologies as well (Callahan 2020). In the case of the lofi hip hop community, anonymity is better preserved on Discord than the social media platforms that Callahan writes of, as the Discord platform does not require users to use identifying information in their profiles. As has been demonstrated in the findings of this research, lofi hip hop community members engage with one another in a shared language focused on the interpersonal care of others–especially students–which affirms their collective identity of a kind community with an international composition. Imagined communities were originally conceived through the lens of political unification, but this lofi hip hop community does not operate with any expressed political orientation. Instead, it subverts the political nature of the 'outside world'. As has been explored in this article, many users consider their membership in the community to be an act of escaping the outside world. As a place of rest and mutual social support, this virtual space continues to distinguish itself from other toxic online spaces. In review of the logistics of shared communication, the official language of the server is English, which serves as a more grounded example of a shared vernacular. The necessity of speaking English to communicate with one another did not present itself as problematic through my findings, which was not a surprise–this kind community of students was not likely to criticize others for practicing a difficult language. The virtual nature of their community structure affirms Anderson's anonymity, as Discord users are unlikely to ever meet one another outside of these shorter interactions. All things considered, the Lofi Girl Discord community functions as a digital imagined community, which allows for participants to engage in a sense of shared identity as members of a prosocial community. But, how does the intercultural communication taking place all over the server fit into a shared language?

To revisit the theoretical lens of cosmopolitanism, combining the theoretical perspectives of Nigel Rapport and Ulf Hannerz can supply the reader with the notion to shake off provincial understandings of borders and nations and engage with local and global identities shared with our fellow humans around the world. Taking advantage of the boundless "thin connections" offered by digital interaction in a Discord server setting can be examined in the same manner.

As one may recall from the survey findings, the present sample of lofi hip hop listeners hail from parts of each inhabited continent, which offers a taste of the sheer magnitude of international communication that takes place in the Lofi Girl. As introduced in the qualitative findings of user-user interactions, intercultural exchange is a common facet of communication. Within the practice of global communication, there are smaller components

yet that combine to form a cosmopolitan perspective. Included are (1) recognition of other's nationality, (2) intercultural exchange/learning, (3) the understanding of the vastness of opportunity to communicate with users around the world:

1. "It's a beautiful machine made of and by people from all the continents" -MJ
2. "[You can] talk to many different people from many different county and culture" -Tomy
3. "There's a lot of folks across different timezones here so there's always someone up or something to join in" -Dann

In belonging to a public global community such as the Lofi Girl Discord server, members have easy access to making new friends that could live on the other side of the planet. The "thin connections" required of cosmopolitanism are fulfilled by the massive, online nature of Discord server, as best exemplified by an aforementioned interview snippet:

> "yes, i enjoy talking with people here just because theres no real harm to it; after all, if i dont enjoy their presence, i can simply tell them that and move on and likely never cross paths with them again. theres no need to awkwardly dance around it" -Storm

Community members understand that communication taking place on Discord does not imitate the social norms of face-to-face communication happening in their daily lives, so connections with other server members can be as thin or thick as they wish them to be. As can be seen in the previous selection of respondent quotations, community members hold attitudes of being able to learn from their fellow members of different nationalities and backgrounds and are optimistic about such opportunities.

As explored earlier, Ulf Hannerz emphasizes the willingness to engage with the Other as one of the most central elements of cosmopolitan practice (1990). I argue that the lofi hip hop community exemplifies this practice when approaching intercultural communication, as seen in the themes that emerged from interview participation. When users recognize each other's cultural differences and participate in the exchange of ideas, they are promoting cosmopolitan communication practices. These practices have been solidified as part of the lofi hip hop community's, to borrow from Anderson, vernacular language (1982).

As seen before in Figure 3, respondents hailed from nearly every continent in the world, and I had only received responses from a sample that, essentially, is the size of dipping a cup into the vast ocean of global participation in the lofi hip hop community. Taken together, this strong display of willingness to engage with culturally-different Others is representative of the Lofi Girl Discord server, which as can be remembered in Figure 4, is advertised as a place to meet others from all around the world.

Taken together, the theoretical application of imagined communities and cosmopolitanism suits the Lofi Girl Discord server, as this space presents itself as overflowing with prosocial and intercultural interactions. In studying how online interaction differs from the offline, more qualitative research is needed to make comparative conclusions. However, in understanding that community members are engaged with intercultural communication in online settings, it could be inferred that they engage in these exchanges when not using Discord, or at the very least, gain practice in intercultural communication in a space with "thin" connections.

Conclusion

In the same manner that lofi hip hop listeners enter the genre searching for music that helps them remain dedicated to their studying and become members of a highly prosocial, multicultural community, it is my hope, reader, that you have entered into this paper with an interest in learning more about the genre of lofi hip hop, and are now able to leave with an informed understanding of this deeply kind virtual space and the members housed within. Perhaps you have been listening along to the Lofi Girl radio as you reach this sentence.

In brief review, lofi hip hop emerged as the result of the DIY ethics and stylistic features of low-fidelity and hip-hop music and now rests in a state of mellow background music considered perfect for student populations around the world.

Indeed, quantitative findings point to listeners being composed of highly global, mostly long-time listening students–or the recently graduated–that have engaged in a "background listener" style that tunes into radios and playlists to help themselves in the attempt of combining studying and relaxation. Interestingly, the amount of engagement in the lofi hip hop genre was unrelated to their level of prosociality, or other-oriented kindness. So, what actually drew so many highly kind people to a virtual community centered on non-lyrical ambient music?

Qualitative findings indicate that Lofi Girl Discord server members are already highly prosocial people thanks to the interactions between their individually-nuanced perspectives on kindness, engagement in a kind and supportive environment, interactions with like-minded, multicultural others, and through how the meaning of lofi hip hop can shift for listeners over time. In this multidimensional involvement in this virtual community, members contribute to the maintenance of a truly kind space.

The implications of this research can be applied to several positive avenues. First, online prosociality has existed since the earliest days of Internet communication, and the individual behaviors and large-scale characteristics of the Lofi Girl Discord server extend the lifespan of online kindness. This work can be neatly labeled as a digital portion of the anthropological understanding of human kindness and communication. As theorized, this large and internationally-grounded community can fit within a cosmopolitan understanding of the ways in which individuals participate in local and global identities, which allows for greater intercultural communication and learning from others to take place.

All in all, lofi hip hop music takes on different meanings for each listener, but a student's engagement in the genre can help them find a positive community ready to offer support. The kind-hearted interactions between hundreds of thousands of users continue to rightfully establish this virtual community as "the friendliest community on Discord".

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Corn, Caco, and Frozen Chicken: Evolving Foodways & Identities Among the Q'Eqchi' Maya

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Abstract

Rural areas are often understood primarily in opposition to their urban counterparts. This juxtaposition means that many rural areas exist at a crossroads between notions of the traditional and the modern, cultural distinctiveness and homogeneity, and outside expectations and individual experience. As a result, rural areas often serve as uniquely generative sites of identity exploration for their inhabitants, as I observed in the remote Q'eqchi'[1] Maya village in Southern Belize where I conducted the following research. The Q'eqchi' have practiced subsistence farming for generations, but as alternate ways of making a living become increasingly available, opportunities to interrogate one's own identity – particularly as it pertains to foodways – become more salient as well. Drawing upon my own ethnographic interviews and observations, I seek to illuminate some of the ways that villagers of rural Belize navigate these tensions around food – and how this process continues to shape Q'eqchi' Maya identity and culture today.

Introduction

I wake around 6:30, like I do every morning, to an already bright room and the hum of three gen-u-ine Lasko fans. Roosters crow amidst a chorus of chirps, whirs and shrieks of native birds. I can no longer detect the level of wildfire smoke in the air – I've gone nose blind to it. It softens and mutes everything on the horizon. Flakes of ash sometimes float gently down. Some days a bit of blue shines through, occasionally there is sunlight strong enough to make you squint. But mostly a pale and stubborn haze stretches high above us.

The last few mornings have been pleasant, with a light breeze passing through, but still so hot that all I want to do is sit in a hammock. I've been waking up with a host of little ailments – congestion, bug bites, a dull headache - as my body isn't yet accustomed to the heat and the smoke. But the prospect of what the day might bring – whether that's a swim in the river, a howler monkey sighting, a visit to a neighbor's cacao farm, or a plate of excellently seasoned black beans – is more than enough to get me out of bed to start another day.

So began one of many mornings in San Pablo,[2] the site where I and nine other students participated in a month-long ethnographic field school in the spring of 2024. Two weeks prior, we had arrived in the village – bleary eyed and sleep deprived from two days of travel, sweating from the mere act of sitting in the tropical air, and so hungry – but nevertheless elated to be there. We were greeted with an enormous meal, served on colorful melamine plates and prepared by the families who coordinated the program, and an earnest welcome speech, written and read to us by Gustavo, the program leader.

Upon arrival, I was most curious about San Pablo's food system – what villagers ate and where their food came from – as well as the language used to describe food and its role in the wider cultural landscape. As I talked with villagers, I learned that corn was especially integral to the Q'eqchi' Maya diet and cultural identity. I also noticed that villagers often made distinctions between local/homegrown foods and store bought ones, separating them on the basis of whether or not they qualified as authentically Mayan.[3] My research focus evolved to address this divide. In this article, I draw upon theoretical perspectives that situate remote areas as valuable sites for identity exploration in order to explain the significance of certain food classifications for the villagers who use them (see Ardener 2012; Thomas et al. 2013). Furthermore, I seek to illuminate what these and other considerations – particularly in the context of rising health concerns and a quickly changing agricultural system – could mean for the question, "Which foods are right for Maya bodies?" (see Cleary, et al. 2021; Dewey et al. 1981; Peller et al. 2023; Solomons and Valdés-Ramos 2002). How villagers answer, I argue, will continue to inform Q'eqchi' Maya culture and identity in important ways.

Background and Ethnographic Setting

Situated along a tributary of the Chayote River, surrounded by small patches of agricultural land and the tropical broadleaf forest of Belize's Toledo District, lies the Q'eqchi' Maya village of San Pablo. The village can only be accessed via one dirt road, sometimes impassable

in the rainy season, and is located a few kilometers east of the Guatemalan border and 90 minutes west (by bus) from the nearest urban center of Punta Gorda.

Archaeologists theorize that at the time of Spanish colonization in the 1600s, Ch'ol Maya inhabited the Toledo District, but were killed or forcibly deported to the highlands by the Spanish, leaving the area empty of its indigenous inhabitants (Wilk 1997: 54).[4] One San Pablo villager, Eduardo, shared a more agentive version with a fellow student of mine:

> [In the conquistador days], what did Mayan people do? … They cannot take it no more. They decided to escape from central lowlands [in Belize] to the highlands in Guatemala, in Mexico. So that was how the Mayan, I would say "disappeared" for a period of time. But they were still living, out in Guatemala.

When the Spanish abandoned the Toledo District a few generations later, British colonial forces and logging companies soon moved in, powered by exploitation of Creole, Garifuna, and Maya labor (Wilk 1997: 55-56). By the late 1800s, land theft and political oppression by European powers had reached a tipping point in the neighboring country of Guatemala, and many of the Mopan and Q'eqchi' Maya who lived there migrated eastward into Belize and rebuilt communities across the Toledo District (see Cambranes 1985: 188, 199, 225). To again cross reference Eduardo:

> When peace was settled afterwards, what they did? Our great, great ancestor?…
>
> They say, okay, you know, that's where my dad lived. That is where our great grandparent lived. So let's go back there. That's how we started. They came back [and] occupied Belize. They settled in San Pablo … somewhere in 1850, somewhere around there.

Though specific historical details may be disputed (including by the Belizean government), few historians or archaeologists would disagree that the Q'eqchi' in San Pablo are indeed descended from the Maya who established ancient civilizations in Belize long before any European conquest (Wilk 1997: xi-xii). These days, San Pablo is made up of sixty or so households, a village schoolhouse, and several Christian churches, and is inhabited almost exclusively by Q'eqchi' Maya people. Some villagers were raised in Belize and learned English in school, others grew up in Guatemala and learned Spanish, but nearly all with whom I interacted spoke Q'eqchi' as their first language. This is in contrast to other regions of Belize and wider Mesoamerica, where it is more common to hear Yucatec, Mopan, or K'iche' spoken - or yet another of the thirty plus languages in the Mayan language family (Coe 2015: 24)

Most families practice subsistence agriculture, using swidden, or slash-and-burn, techniques, and supplement their diet with ingredients purchased at one of the small shops in the village or from the markets in Punta Gorda. It is common for husbands to leave their families and work in the city for periods of time to earn a greater income than they might by farming.

Foreign visitors to San Pablo are infrequent but not unusual. A homestay program exists, in which tourists can stay for a week at a time with a local host family, but it only happens every one to two years. Villagers often spoke fondly of a past Peace Corps volunteer who helped establish the village's current drop toilets, and a scientist who conducted research on the soil, but spring 2024 was the first time a group of American university students had come to stay. We arrived at the tail end of the dry season – by all accounts, it had been prolonged that year – and as my journal entry described, the air was daily filled with a smoky haze from the wildfires that burned on the beautiful green hillsides and mountains surrounding the village.

Our program coincided with the launch of what Gustavo called "The Authentic Maya Ecolodge." This was the name on his brand new business license and on the freshly painted sign on our bunkhouse. He hoped it would become a tourist destination in the months following our departure.

Rural Spaces: Crucibles of Identity Formation

Difficult to access, reliant upon an agricultural economy, surrounded by undeveloped forest land, inhabited by residents who all know one another – these are all common characteristics associated with rurality or remote areas, and they can all be used to describe the village of San Pablo. But "remoteness," as Edwin Ardener (2012) calls it, can occur independent of geography or demographic data – its primary condition is one of periphery that is "by definition not properly linked to the dominant zone" and further, exists in the imagination of said dominant zone, rather than being "part of its codified experience" (532). These peripheries can take many forms – from pockets of devout religionists in New York City to small villages in the Belizean rainforest – and are often assigned predictable motifs like "traditional," "wild," "simple," or "an escape" by those who live outside of them (Thomas et al. 2013, as cited in Harvey 2015:124).

In recent decades, many anthropologists have pushed back against such motifs as these, specifically of the "traditional" and the "modern," and I attempt to follow their lead. The World Intellectual Property Organization

(2025) classifies traditional cultural expressions as "skills and practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community" – but even well-thought out definitions like this one fail to address questions like those of Ngapo and others (2021): "When does a custom or method become a tradition? Additionally, does it remain a tradition, even when it has evolved to the point that the original method or custom is no longer recognisable?" (4).

Furthermore, classifying some people as "traditional" and others as "modern" can imply that some cultures are "just like [one's own] at an earlier stage of development," and that all are on some imagined evolutionary trajectory towards the progress and prestige of Western capitalism (Wilk 1997:5).

Regardless of academia's valiant attempts to remain aloof from such notions, these imagined designations still carry weight in so-called "traditional" communities like San Pablo. John Hawkins (1984) as paraphrased by Wilk (1997:4), elaborates further on the impact this kind of language might have on the individual: "Being traditional, to those who are so defined, means having an identity at least partially determined in opposition to a dominating, and usually exploiting, culture." Wilk (1997) continues, "Being someone's other also defines a self" (4) – and a self-defined as "traditional" is a one that is frozen in time, with no room to evolve, change, or adapt.

This means that in any number of situations, residents of San Pablo must navigate their own best guess of how they are perceived by outsiders, and decide which of those perceptions they will embrace or reject – essentially, how they will define themselves while being someone's "other." Many times, villagers may choose to "incorporate [certain] perceptions into the physical environment" because of the accompanying advantages, financial or otherwise (Thomas et al. 2013, as cited in Harvey 2015:124).

The presence of these tensions and inquiries is the reason why rural spaces can so often exist as "crucibles of the creation of identity" (Ardener 2012:532) – and why I argue that San Pablo provides a uniquely generative environment to explore the question, "What does it really mean to be Q'eqchi' Maya?"

"We the Q'eqchi' Maya, Our Food is Corn"

In order to understand the food system in the village, it is essential to acknowledge the foundational role of corn. While all corn varieties are descended from teosinte, a wild grass domesticated by ancient Mesoamericans about 9,000 years ago, and share the same binomial classification of *Zea mays* (Piperno et al. 2009:5019), genetic variation within the species is wide ranging. The kind of corn I will refer to in this article is the native, starchy, open-pollinating variety, not to be confused with the sweet corn of Midwest county fairs or the mass-produced hybrid varieties of industry (see Grandia 2024:x). The importance of corn was something that villagers spoke of often; on multiple occasions, I was told matter-of-factly that the Q'eqchi' Maya consume it three times a day, every day (which certainly proved true for us students as we ate our way through corn tortillas, tamales, *panades*, hot porridge, a sweet corn drink, popcorn, and more). Furthermore, as many anthropologists have observed, the role of corn goes beyond nutrition for the Q'eqchi' Maya – it also "holds a central place in mythology and religion, and [great] historical importance in cooking, diet, and ritual" (Wilk 1997:116). For Q'eqchi' Maya farmers, as Liza Grandia (2024) writes, "[corn] … expresses history, cultural heritage, culinary tradition, landscape, kinship, community, and sense of home" (7).

The centrality of corn is echoed in the cosmologies of other Mayan cultural groups, like in the Popol Vuh, the K'iche' creation story in which the first humans are formed from a dough of ground corn (see Christenson 2007:181), and in the mythology of other Indigenous American groups like the Seneca, who tell a story of the Three Sisters – beans, corn, and squash – whose strengths are magnified when they are planted together (see Lewandowski 1987: 85-88).

I will explore additional ways in which corn is interwoven into village life later on; for now, San Pablo resident Josefina puts it well: "We, the Q'eqchi' Maya, our food is corn," she mused one afternoon as she swayed in a colorful woven hammock. "Corn is our food, it is our life."

Methodology

As previously mentioned, this research was conducted as part of an undergraduate field school. In the months leading up to travel, I selected a topical focus, reviewed relevant literature, and developed research questions based on my personal interests. My fellow anthropology students and I arrived in Belize in May of 2024. We spent approximately three weeks in the village of San Pablo, and an additional week visiting nearby archaeological sites and natural landmarks. While in the village, we stayed in our own thatch house as a student group, but participated in a sort of shared homestay program, in which we spent our days getting to know each of the 10 participating families by preparing/eating meals with them and spending time in their homes. The majority of the program fee that each of the students paid went directly towards compensating these families for the time and labor they put into the program.

In San Pablo our days were largely unstructured, and I was free to pursue my own research interests independent of other field school participants. As I

became acquainted with village members, I engaged in conversations about their food and farming practices, prepared and ate a wide variety of dishes alongside them, witnessed gathering and hunting of edible plants and game from the surrounding forest, helped bind together cohune palm leaves for roofing, and visited cornfields, various spots along the river, and favorite haunts of howler monkeys, among many other things. Most of my conversations were informal, but some were scheduled ahead of time and involved specific questions and careful notetaking. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish. Most interlocutors were in their 20s or 30s, with a relatively even split between men and women, though I regularly spoke to and interacted with older and younger members of the community as well. Throughout each day, I attempted to write down, or voice record, as many additional details as possible about what I was experiencing and learning. When interests of field school students overlapped, we occasionally conducted collaborative interviews or shared ethnographic data. I have incorporated a few such quotes into this article when relevant, taking care to note their source.

Upon returning home, I transcribed my audio recordings and typed up my field notes, then coded and sorted the resulting data by theme in order to form the following analysis.

Evolving Foodways, Shifting Identities

After a few weeks in the village, I began to develop a sense of the foods that formed the foundation of many families' diets. Kitchen staples included the following: corn, black beans, cacao, chicken, eggs, garden herbs/root vegetables, easy-to-find edible plants like cohune cabbage (*Attalea cohune*) or jippi jappa (*Carludovica palmata*), and store bought items like cooking oil, seasonings, aromatics, and powdered drink mixes. With the exception of the latter few, these staple foods were usually grown or gathered by the family or someone in the village. Villagers offered these foods to us multiple times a week as part of the meals they prepared.

Specific foods – the kind usually reserved for celebrations, birthdays, or the occasional treat – were also shared with enthusiasm. Depending on the family, these special occasion foods could take many forms: fresh produce or expensive ingredients from Punta Gorda (watermelon, pineapple, white bread, real butter), game animals like the gibnut (a mid-sized rodent considered a Belizean delicacy), homemade foods requiring processed ingredients (flour tortillas, rice dishes, chocolate cake), or time intensive, multi-step dishes like tamales steamed in waha leaves. Pre-packaged snacks (cookies, soda, popsicles), or premade dishes (canned beans, hot dogs), were also available in the local shops, but were only offered to us on a few occasions.

Mealtimes often included ethnographically rich moments and offered opportunities to discuss specific ingredients, methods of cultivation, and preferred preparation, among other foodways. I learned that the corn and black beans came from the patchwork of family farms that were interspersed in the rainforest surrounding the village, and that most villagers tended chickens, pigs, small vegetable gardens and perhaps a few cacao or plantain trees near their houses. Ingredients like flour, sugar, and rice could be purchased in one of the many shops run by San Pablo residents (often based inside or next to their homes). A handful of families in the village talked of yearly camping trips – i.e., three weeks sleeping in the forest and harvesting *pepitos*, a specific type of pumpkin seed which could be sold by the bucketful to Guatemalan buyers. For many families, it was common to hunt or forage in the forest on a weekly basis and to make a couple of trips a month to Punta Gorda for harder-to-find ingredients (see table 1).

Local Foods, Shop Foods

As the days went on, I began to notice a trend of people proudly labeling some foods as "local." This seemed out of place to me – a phrase I would expect to hear at an American farm-to-table restaurant, but not necessarily in a subsistence farming community where most of what we ate had been harvested or butchered by whoever shared it with us. To call food local felt unnecessarily obvious.

One evening, I brought it up with our next door neighbor, Maria Elena. At the end of the day, all of us students would gather under the small thatch roof pavilion next to our bunkhouse, often joined by a rotating cast of energetic neighbor kids, and Maria Elena and I sometimes liked to lean on the banister in the shadows, observing the pleasant clamor of conversation and card games and tickle fights. The sun sets early in San Pablo, so the long, canvas covered table was always harshly lit by a single overhead bulb (and the air lit with the kids' delirious laughter, truly one of the best sounds in the world) with dogs barking and crickets trilling in the surrounding darkness. To my surprise, Maria Elena sought me out that day, announcing, "Okay Annie, I'm ready to answer all of your questions." I asked her why everyone used the phrase "local chicken" to describe the meat they fed us. Without missing a beat, she responded with the only joke I ever heard her make – delivered in Spanish, her second language. "*Porque los gallos siempre dicen quiquiriquí!*" she grinned. "*Por eso tenemos 'loco chicken.*'" ("Because the roosters always say *cock-a-doodle-doo!* Because of this we have 'loco chicken.")

After we stopped giggling, Maria Elena went on to explain that "local chicken" referred to chickens that villagers raised themselves. They could control exactly what they ate (typically leftovers, and dried yellow corn)

opposed to the plastic wrapped frozen chicken being sold in the shop, whose diet was a mystery. Because of this, asserted Maria Elena, local chickens "*más dar fuerza!*" – give you more strength.

I discussed this topic with several more interviewees and it seemed that, akin to the theories of Ardener (2012) which assert that remoteness stems from something more nuanced than geographic location, as well as those of Ngapo and others (2021), who point out the impossibility of pinning down a timeless and unchanged "traditional" practice, whether or not an ingredient was deemed *local* in San Pablo was not as simple as its food miles or its unbroken chain to precolonial foodways. Rather, it was more about an ingredient's perceived degree of separation from the diets of villagers' parents or grandparents. As a descriptor for food, it was often used interchangeably with "Mayan." This distinction excluded rice (even if grown nearby, it is not native to Central America) and homemade flour tortillas, but included indigenous staples like corn, beans, cohune palm, and cacao, as well as (non-native but long-domesticated) livestock like home-raised pigs and chickens, and special occasion foods like gibnut and tamales. Conversely, non-local foods were often referred to as "shop" or "tienda" food.

I also observed that villagers sometimes alluded to ideas of simplicity or wildness when describing Mayan food (see Thomas et al. 2013, as cited in Harvey 2015:124) – like when a village woman explained that local chicken just needs salt and pepper, while frozen chicken requires an unhealthy degree of seasonings – or when another villager proudly – and illegally – killed a **curassow**[5] one night for dinner, parading the wild bird around and inviting us to pluck feathers for keepsakes, even though we already had more than enough food to eat that night.

Local Foods as Critical Markers of Q'eqchi' Maya Identity

What might these variable food categories mean for those who consume them every day? Why does it matter that some foods are called local, Mayan, authentic, simple, wild and traditional, while others are modern, foreign, urban, purchased, processed, or from the outside? "In *Homo sapiens* food not only nourishes but also signifies," Claude Fischler (1988) writes. "To incorporate a food is, in both real and imaginary terms, to incorporate all or some of its properties: we become what we eat. Incorporation is a basis of identity" (276, 279). Thus, when the *Homo sapiens* of San Pablo incorporate local, authentic Mayan foods like corn – which is indigenous to Belize – into their bodies, they reinforce their own indigeneity and authentic Q'eqchi' Maya-ness. Grandia (2024) suggests that corn represents "kinship, community, and sense of home" (7) – so to consume it may also create a connection to ancestors who lived off of corn and to fellow villagers who do so now, culminating in an overall sense of belongingness to a land and a people. This may be uniquely important for an ethnic group whose own government has at times classified them as alien immigrants (Wilk 1997: xi).

One experience comes to mind as especially indicative of how villagers in San Pablo assign deep personal meaning to certain foodways, especially those around corn.

One night early on in our stay, we were all gathered at the home of Josefina and Edwin, a sociable and friendly couple with five kids, and Edwin mentioned that he was going to plant corn in the coming days with several other friends and neighbors. He agreed – albeit a bit hesitantly – when a few of us, including my professor and me, asked to accompany him. We agreed on a day and a time – Monday morning at 6am – and Gustavo promised to take us to the correct field.

When the time came, Gustavo hemmed and hawed a bit, eventually declaring, "No … it will be better to go later. I'll take you after breakfast." Right before we left, Gustavo's 11 year old son Daniel ran up and handed me a colorful woven crossbody bag, about 9 by 9 inches, called a *coxtal*. "For the corn!" he said. The farm was a very long, very hot walk away. By the time we got there, the men had already finished planting. Edwin was accommodating enough to show us his method, so we each sowed a few handfuls of seed before walking back to the village. I recorded the instructions in my field journal as follows:

> Take a stick (2 cm in diameter, 2 m tall or so) with the end cut on a diagonal, and repeatedly stab it into a spot on the ground. Rotate it around to widen the hole, then take seven corn kernels in your hand (this is a good number to ensure that at least one or two will take root), drop them in and keep moving. I watched Edwin and noticed that he definitely has the muscle memory of what seven kernels feels like, but regardless he always gives a quick glance to visually count how many he had in his hand before planting. Holes are spaced about 3 ft apart, and everyone keeps their corn kernels in a *coxtal* like mine, which I'm told are often woven by village women specifically for this purpose.

Once we arrived back in the village, we were invited to share a meal that the wives of the corn planters had been preparing all morning - though we could hardly have done less to earn it. Upon reflection, it was hard to believe that Gustavo, a lifelong farmer and neighbor of Edwin, wouldn't have known that we would arrive too late. We discussed it among ourselves later: Why was Edwin hesitant for us to come along? Why did Gustavo

deliberately bring us to the field after planting was over? I wondered if it had something to do with gender, as men are the ones who typically plant corn. Perhaps they didn't want to overwork the delicate Americans in the hot Belizean sun, or didn't trust us to do a good job (not unreasonable, as none of us were farmers).

A few days later, some families were helping to lay a roof on a neighbor's new shed. As was the case for corn planting, the women worked together to prepare a big meal while the men worked outside. After a few of us students (all of us women) hung around a while, Gustavo took the hint that we really did want to participate, even though it was a men's chore. We were invited to climb up on the building frame to help tie stacks of palm fronds in place. In my eyes, this task seemed just as gendered and just as important to a villager's livelihood as planting corn, and I wondered why we were allowed to participate. Perhaps there was something more elemental about corn planting that wasn't worth compromising, and involving amateur outsiders was too great a risk – a reasonable assumption when one considers how careful Edwin was in his instructions to us. On one attempt to place his seven corn kernels, my professor dropped one on the ground and six in the hole. He asked Edwin if it was okay and Edwin said seriously, "No. It might disrupt balance."

Regardless of the reasons that Gustavo brought us late to the planting, it was clear to me that for San Pablo villagers, sowing corn was more than just a simple chore that kept one's family fed. Despite the fact that corn and other indigenous foods were rarely mentioned in a cosmological sense (e.g., those I spoke with were far more familiar with the tale of Adam and Eve than with the Popol Vuh), villagers' practices around planting – from the textile tradition of colorful *coxtal* bags to the power of a misplaced kernel to interrupt some greater balance, as well as the overall conviction that corn is an essential Q'eqchi' Maya life source – indicate that specific foods do indeed act as "a system of communication, a body of images" of what it means to be Q'eqchi' Maya (Barthes 1997:21).

Alternate Diets, Alternate Livelihoods

What happens when deeply significant foodways are challenged? Over the course of their lifetimes, many villagers had noticed large scale changes in San Pablo when it came to diet. Eduardo, a tour guide and San Pablo resident, shared the following with another student:

> When I was raised by my parents, we don't eat much rice. We don't eat much flour tortilla. We don't rely on going to the supermarket to purchase whatever. My father would plant and grow ground food: cassava and yam … We [would] eat corn tortilla three times for the day. Maybe we would fry eggs, beans on the side, or maybe stew chicken, maybe roast chicken, maybe lancha fish.
>
> All of that we eat. But nowadays, we tend not to. Nowadays, kids growing up, they don't want … no kind of … Mayan food. They want canned food, junk foods, and things that might be very delicious.

Many parents echoed this sentiment, expressing that they often felt pressure from their children to purchase and prepare shop food over local food. Foodways are continuously shifting in other ways as well: Women continue to trade older culinary customs for more practical ones (like using a motorized corn mill opposed to a manual one). Tour guides are now the only ones who learn the old stories of people formed from masa – made of four distinct colors for Maya blood, bone, skin and hair. The shopkeepers in the village regularly adjust their snack supply to meet the changing interests of their neighbors – for example, in preparation for our arrival, they stocked up on ice cream and popsicles.

This is to be expected among any culture -- no group lives in a vacuum, and the Q'eqchi' Maya are no exception. Wilk (1997) argues that they have always been connected to a market economy of some kind (73), and they have adapted to changes in economic pressure, social structure, food availability, and more as long as they have been Q'eqchi' Maya. However, today's shifting foodways are also accompanied by an increase in employment options. In recent generations, a lifestyle that revolved around planting, tending, harvesting, preparing, and eating crops like corn, beans, and cacao, as well as foraging and hunting in the forest, may have felt like the only option. This is no longer the case for some villagers. Many men spend a portion of the year working in the city, where they can earn higher wages. Others have capitalized on the global wave of ecotourism and have established caving, hiking, and wildlife tours – and homestay programs like ours! Gustavo was quick to encourage his 11 year old son Daniel's dream of becoming a banker in Punta Gorda instead of a farmer ("I won't have to work in the hot sun!" Daniel explained with his characteristic grin), and there is an increasing awareness of the market for "natural" food – two brothers in the village planned to start an organic vegetable farm that will allow them to sell produce to expensive restaurants in nearby beach towns.

But for a group whose identity and livelihood is so closely intertwined with specific indigenous crops, any alternatives to subsistence farming would likely bring questions of selfhood and cultural distinctiveness into sharp focus: What does it mean to consume less corn? To eat more shop food? If Mayan ingredients do indeed reinforce Mayan identity, then the opposite must

be true as well as well – to eat less corn is to risk the *loss* of cultural heritage, kinship, community, and sense of home – replaced with whatever properties accompany the foods one eats instead (see Cleary et al. 2021). These properties could range from modern, trendy, and interesting (red beans and rice! barbecue chicken! homemade donuts!) to unhealthy, lazy, and disconnected (packaged sweets! canned beans! flour tortillas!).

Which foods are right for Maya bodies?

As food and livelihood options increase, San Pablo residents are grappling with yet another layer of complexity – beyond impacting one's cultural identity, does a shift towards non-Mayan foods impact Maya bodies? Many villagers I spoke with held a conviction that Maya bodies were just not meant to consume shop foods. "The ancient, ancient fathers and ancient, ancient people grew everything. They don't depend on the shop," Felipe, a young father whose wife Anis became a friend of mine, explained. "Our bodies are used to eating underground foods!" During another conversation, Josefina reinforced the idea of ancientness: "My parents would say, 'If we don't have corn, we won't live' [and] it has been this way from a long time." If a diet that evolves towards more rice and white flour instead of corn and "ground foods" isn't just a departure from Mayan ingredients, but from the source of Mayan life, then poor health would seem a reasonable result.

And for many villagers, increasingly poor health was a real concern. Agreeing with Felipe, Anis confided, "Sometimes we think sickness comes from food in the shop; nobody knows [for sure], but we think this." Another neighbor shared that he developed an issue with high cholesterol once he stopped farming and went away to work in the city, where non-Mayan foods were plentiful. As Eduardo, the tour guide I quoted who remembered a childhood of ground food, corn, beans, and the occasional chicken or fish, lamented: "The canned food, junk foods, and things that might be very delicious … [are] killing at the same time . . . New things are introduced. We haven't heard about diabetic, cholesterol, [blood] pressure and cancer … [until] about 20 years [ago]. Teresa, a San Pablo nurse who works out of her home most days, agreed. "Fourteen years ago I began my work as a nurse," she explained. "At that point no one I knew had diabetes or hypertension. Now I have 16 patients with this. Why? Because people are preferring flour tortillas, rice, canned beans, and frozen chicken, opposed to local foods … those frozen chickens are mature in 4 or 5 weeks at the factory farm, and they are full of chemicals and cause cancer."

Teresa's observations reflect documented health trends in other regions of Mesoamerica that have experienced a shift away from a subsistence-only diet (see Dewey et al. 1981; Leatherman and Goodman 2005; Solomons and Valdés-Ramos 2002). In the case of San Pablo villagers like Eduardo, Anis, Felipe, Maria Elena, and Teresa, who are watching more and more of their neighbors get sick, non-Mayan foods are increasingly associated with real health risks that extend beyond – or perhaps exist because of – their symbolic departure from Mayan identity.

Why choose one foodway over another?

"If shop food makes people sick, why do so many people prefer it?" I wondered. Nurse Teresa explained, "They want to be modern, they want to be like the people they see outside. Also, it's easier! Even if people have dried beans they just want the convenience of canned beans from the shop." As Eduardo mentioned, shop foods are popular with young people – and Maria Elena could relate. "We don't want to buy food every day. We know it is not healthy," she sighed with all the weariness of a young mom. "But [my son] Junior loves tienda food." Ardener (2012) writes that in remote areas, "the world always beckons … to the young, for it leads from your very door to everywhere" (529). It seems likely that shop food, imported from outside sources, could carry with it notions of the wider, or "modern," world, and all its associated excitement and newness.

Additionally, as tourism rates rise in Belize (ForwardKeys 2024:7-8, Belize Tourism Board 2025), some villagers are choosing to capitalize on their own cultural identity as a commodity (as in the case of the Authentic Maya Ecolodge) and are actively inviting outsiders to come to San Pablo. This adds yet another consideration into the mix for the villagers who then interact with those outsiders. Now, as they decide what to eat and how to make a living, they must also determine which expectations of outsiders they will embrace or reject, and which aspects of their identities would be most advantageous to share. If village residents want to display "authentic Maya" methods of corn preparation, will they choose to highlight the most common practice – paying a neighbor to use their motorized corn mill? How about the woman who uses a metal hand crank? Or perhaps someone who grinds corn with a (at times factory produced, but always ancient looking) mono and metate? Each practice has been utilized in varying degrees by residents of the village in the past century – but some better fulfill the expectations of outsiders, others are most accurate to the everyday experiences of villagers, while still others may create feelings of connection and cultural heritage that villagers value and enjoy sharing with visitors.

Nothing I observed in San Pablo better illustrated these tensions than something Gustavo called

the "cultural celebration," which was an experience all of us students shared on one of our last days in the village. My field notes read as follows:

> On the day of our cultural celebration, several village women generously lent us beautiful lacy blouses and thick gathered skirts to wear, and Gustavo brought people from around the village to demonstrate what he called "authentic Maya traditions." I stopped into our neighbors' house to visit Josefina, who was roasting cacao beans on a comal. "Do you ever wear these kind of clothes?" I asked, gesturing to my outfit. "No," she responded matter of factly. "Much too hot."
>
> Later, after the cacao had been sufficiently roasted, Josefina brought the beans into the pavilion and began to grind them into a paste using a mano and metate. All of the Americans present were invited to try their hand at it while all the villagers watched and Gustavo took photos. We ate fruit and baked goods that women in the village had prepared, and then Gustavo turned on a recording of Belizean marimba music and said, "Okay! Now it's time to dance! The kids will teach you." All of us, students and village kids, stood around for a minute, staring at each other, until we eventually loosened up and began to dance, sending the adults into gales of laughter with our skipping and spinning.

I found myself reflecting on this experience frequently – how it was informative, quite a lot of fun, and clearly a performance. As far as I could tell, the "authentic Maya traditions" that the villagers chose to display did not, in many cases, accurately reflect their day to day lives. For example, I knew from my conversations with many village women that roasting and grinding one's own cacao was common, but everyone I spoke to typically used a metal hand crank to do it – it was easier and more efficient.

This simple vignette, along with the realities of convenient, trendy shop food that Maria Elena and Teresa discussed, offer insight into the kind of considerations that the Q'eqchi' Maya of San Pablo must weigh when deciding which foodways or livelihoods to pursue – ease of preparation, curiosity about new experiences, pressure from children, economic incentives, personal tastes and interests – but also, will this make me or my family sick? How much energy do I have to sow another farm field – or cook after of a long day of laundry? Which cultural expectations make the most economic sense to embrace? What does this type of food, style of preparation, or career say about who I am and how I relate to my community?

I observed that each family's food decisions depended on their values as well as needs, which sometimes changed from day to day. Engaging in and/or displaying "authentic Maya" foodways can be a way to signify cultural distinctiveness or membership in a specific cultural group, as well as a way to connect with ancestors, to earn a living through creating an experience that tourists expect, to engage in enjoyable labor, to maintain physical health, to reinforce indigeneity, and so much more. On the other hand, engaging in and/or displaying "modern" foodways can be a way to defy an outsider's expectations, distance oneself from certain cultural identities, follow a popular trend, and explore new experiences – or could simply be a matter of personal preference, availability, or treating a high schooler to their favorite food.

Conclusion

Foodways contain and communicate entire worlds (Barthes 1997:23). In a subsistence farming community like San Pablo, the cultivation, harvest, and preparation of food constitutes entire livelihoods as well. As villagers balance increased preferences for outside food, more career choices, frequent opportunities to engage with outsiders, and rising health concerns, the question of, "What should we eat for dinner?" perhaps carries deeper significance than in previous generations – and throws matters of individual identity, cultural distinctiveness, physical wellness, and outside perceptions into sharp relief.

I argue that rural areas like San Pablo are truly generative, imaginative spaces for the Q'eqchi' to explore such matters, including questions like: If I eat outside foods, do I become an outsider? Or is there perhaps a new food identity to forge that allows for more flexibility? If so, which foodways must be kept to maintain that identity and/or health? Will newly adopted foodways somehow dilute Q'eqchi' Maya identity?

Some anthropologists argue that the way the Q'eqchi' think about food actually has "adaptive significance" and that the sacredness of corn production and consumption in particular acts as "a stable core" of independence and survival in an ever-fluctuating global market (see Wilk 1997: 140-141). Other researchers have documented recent practices among Kekchi Maya communities that extend far beyond dominant expectations of simplicity, tradition, or wildness – such as individuals in central Guatemala whose position as market vendors allows them to become "mediators of two, sometimes conflicting, cultural realties: the Maya past and the rapidly globalizing present" (Kistler 2014: 2).

The options for Q'eqchi' Maya identity formation and evolution are endless, through foodways and otherwise. Which direction(s) the villagers of San Pablo will take – which world(s) they will choose to signify – remains unseen. In any case, I am privileged to have learned of some of the nuances that will undoubtedly

factor into their future food decisions, and I am confident that they will continue to build and shape their food identities in creative ways, continually evolving towards new understandings of that foundational substance which weaves through our bodies, our families, our economy, and our daily lives.

Tables

Table 1. A Partial list of San Pablo Foods and their Typical Sources

Grown/Raised in San Pablo		Hunted/Gathered	Available in San Pablo Shops	Available from Punta Gorda Markets	
Chickens (meat and eggs)	Field corn	Armadillo	Beef (ground, frozen)	Butter	Cucumber
Pigs	Okra	Game birds, such as currasow	Canola oil	Gingerbread	Garlic
Turkeys	Pineapple	Gibnut	Chicken (frozen)	Honey	Ginger
Annatto	Plantain	Iguana	Eggs	Wine	Lettuce
Bell pepper	Rice	Peccary	Flour (wheat, bleached)	Apples	Mango
Black beans	Samat (*Eryngium foetidum*)	River fish	Hot dogs	Avocado	Onion
Breadfruit	Scallion	Cohune nuts, palm heart (*Attalea cohune*)	Hot sauce	Bananas	Pineapple
Cacao	Soursop	Jippi jappa palm shoots (*Carludovica palmata*)	Ice cream	Beans (red, black, pinto)	Samat (*Eryngium foetidum*)
Callalloo (*Amaranth spp.*)	Squash, various kinds (*Cucurbita spp.*)	Wari palm shoots (*Astrocaryum mexicanum*)	Lard	Beets	Squash, various kinds (*Cucurbita spp.*)
Cassava			Popsicles	Broccoli	Sweet corn
Chili peppers			Soda	Cabbage	Sweet potato
Chayote (*Sechium edule*)			Sugar	Carrots	Tomatoes
Cilantro			Tang, Koolaid, other powdered drink mixes	Cassava	Watermelon
Coconut			Rice	Celery	
Coco root (*Xanthosoma violaceum*)			Vegetables resold from Punta Gorda: Cabbage, carrots, garlic, onions, potatoes, tomatoes	Cilantro	

Note: Data is my own (2024). Items are organized first by animal products and prepared foods and secondly by plant foods.

Notes

1. Though the villagers I met in Southern Belize used a common English spelling, Kekchi, in writing about their language and culture, Q'eqchi' is used most often in the current anthropological literature. I have chosen to use the latter spelling here.
2. In order to respect the privacy of my interviewees, some names of people and places have been changed.
3. Accepted academic practices dictate the use of "Mayan" to describe the language family and "Maya" to describe most other aspects of culture ("Maya villagers" or "Maya clothing"). Though the villagers I spoke to always referred to themselves as "Kekchi Maya," not "Kekchi Mayan," these descriptors were used interchangeably in other settings. I follow their lead here.
4. Much of my research draws on the writing of Richard Wilk, who in recent months has plead guilty to egregious felony charges. I reference him not as an homage, but because his work remains quite relevant to the wider body of Southern Belizean ethnography as well as to the focus of this article.
5. The Belizean government does allow citizens to hunt curassow (Crax rubra) at certain times of the year, typically from July-January (Belize Forest Department 2017: 6, 18), but at the time, this was rarely enforced in areas as remote as San Pablo. Thus, it was not out of the ordinary for villagers to share a curassow with us in May.

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