Quarantining and Dining

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Quarantining and Dining

Madeline Flagg

Honors Project

Submitted to the Honors College at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with University Honors on 5/10/2020

Jenn Stucker of School of Art Department, Advisor

Dr. Lucy Long of Food and Nutrition Department, Advisor
Observations:

I have worked in the restaurant industry since I was first able to start working; the age of 15 1/2. I have moved from a hostess position, to a server, and now to a social media manager for the restaurant I have been employed at for 4 years. The love and passion I have for my job has helped me make a lot of realizations about people and the connection to the food they eat. Food is more than what we eat. It is part of our identity. It creates lasting memories. It is a thing that unifies our social interactions. Many of my projects throughout my undergraduate education have come to deal with topics within food culture. I knew I wanted to pursue research on food culture long term and embrace the study for my thesis.

As unfortunate as it is to have a global pandemic hit at the time of graduation and alter the capacity of my project, I found the light in the situation that brought out a new side to food culture that excited me. Something I have come to realize through the COVID-19 pandemic is how we often take the power of food for granted. Whether individuals realize it or not, we grasp onto food for comfort and there are more ways than we may think we use it beyond consumption. These are the characteristics I wanted to explore in this project. The pandemic also presented a unique opportunity to make my project both relevant to this exact period of time, while also aiding those affected.

Research:

I started my research by looking at food culture from a wide scope. This created quite an extensive range of research, however this helped me narrow in on the specific areas within food culture that I wanted to expand on through my project. The web below illustrates the different topics that were included in my thesis’s annotated bibliography and research.
During the summer of ’19 I developed a series of visual experiments utilizing my foundation of initial research. Some of the experimentation included creating plates with typographic sayings that critique food photography in restaurants, branded placemats with QR codes to expand restaurants marketing techniques, and photographic experiments that reflect a transition of food culture from historical representations at the dining setting. Much of this initial research was rooted in a critique of how the digital age has shaped the food culture as we know it today. Our culture is victim to pulling out our phones at the dinner place and snapping a photo of our plate almost instantaneously from when the plate is set before us, hence the term “phone eats first.” The dining experience of many restaurants has changed as well. There is more priority given to developing picture worthy dishes and plates that please the aesthetic senses.

What is convincing us to see before we eat? Are we followers to the trends in mass culture, or is it about the psychology to the aesthetics of food composition? It is also notable that this trend is more common today than it was 10 or 20 years ago. Technology has become more prominent, however there must be a deeper meaning behind why we feel inclined to document the experience of dining. I initially wanted to explore the cultural influences that shape the relationship between consumer and the plate. This involves an interdisciplinary basis of research including the psychology of food, cultural anthropology, and sociology. The research question that represents these observations and research is best asked as, “How is the space between consumer and plate being created through cultural mediation?”

The next step to the project development was my submission to the BGSU School of Art’s Bachelor of Fine Arts Thesis exhibition. The project submitted to this show was an installation piece titled MEDIATE and it attempts to answer the research question above. The installation consisted of four chairs and a table, with a projected video casted onto the table top’s surface. The dining furniture resembled that of a restaurant interior, in order to immerse the viewer in a public dining setting. The installation invites spectators to sit at the table, directed by a sign.

The artist statement for the piece reads, “MEDIATE explores the social interactions created through food by utilizing audio, projected images, and designed props to immerse the viewer in a dinner setting. Food in today’s world exists in a digital culture, which has changed the way we interact with it, and has changed food culture as a whole. Our societal relationship with food and dining is constantly growing, and this is a process we should embrace because eating is vital to our lives and plays a prominent role in our social interactions every day. The video component of this installation transforms physical food into digital food at the dinner setting. These are collected images from people’s camera rolls, taken by you and I alike, which shows how individuals’ relationship to what they eat is a part of their self identity. The audio immerses the viewer into an eating setting by stimulating familiar sounds of social eating. The typographic dinner table napkins incorporate the lively language used with food on the online world. Food is social, food is cultural capital, food is memorable, food is a storyteller, and it socially unites you and I.”

MEDIATE was not accepted into the BFA show, and the project’s growth continued. Due to BGSU’s instruction being moved to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the accessibility to materials and locations changed the nature of this body of work. The restricting circumstances led to a discovery within food culture that was previously overlooked in the research. I observed that our society, specifically United States culture, grasp on to food through an emotional seeking for comfort. I embraced this newfound discovery in my thesis, and created a pivot in its visual representation. The new research question transitioned to, “How is food culture a powerful tool of comfort for people?” The new body of work is titled Quarantining and Dining.

Methodology: Project Overview

Quarantining and Dining captures and reflects the many ways in which comfort is provided through food. The project content was collected through food culture research, interviews, and observation and then mediated through Instagram. The Instagram feed has a designed aesthetic architecture and branding system that makes it distinct and identifiable. The Instagram account name can be found @Quarantininganddining. Although the project is rooted in Midwestern food culture, the perspectives provided are from across the United States, as well as from numerous
occupations in order to express a diverse range of perspectives. The Instagram account encourages interaction and an exchange of ideas.

Methodology: Project Justification

The methodology to investigating comfort utilizes a campaign style project to involve people digitally. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people more than ever are seeking ways at home to be creative with their time, and whether consciously or unintentionally, people tend to embrace the foodways in their daily activity. Foodways are the ways in which food connects individuals to their past and present identities. See definition and description below (credits to Dr. Lucy Long of Food and Nutrition at BGSU)

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**FOODWAYS**

Food connects us both inwardly to our own pasts and identities and outwardly to the larger world, to economies, ecologies, societies, culture, and health (physical, emotional, and spiritual). It does that partly through the diverse and multiple activities involved around eating. Food is more than just the “stuff” we eat. It is

**FOOD—“Matter considered appropriate for ingestion”**

1. **Cultural Construction**—every culture constructs its own concepts of what is appropriate for ingestion. Notions of EDIBILITY reflect worldview.
2. **Social Construction**—every society constructs its own system of evaluating the quality and desirability of different foods. PALATABILITY reflects social structure.
3. **Personal Construction**—every individual has their own preferences and memories surrounding food.

**FOODWAYS**—The total system of practices and concepts surrounding food and eating. Change in one area affects others. It allows for individual variations and constructions. Memories and meanings get attached to food in subtle, everyday, unrecognized ways through the various activities and contexts surrounding food and eating.

**PRODUCT**—the food itself (ingredient, recipe, dish, meal, meal system)

**PRACTICES/PROCESSES**

- Production (Producing the ingredients for food)
- Procurement (Obtaining the ingredients or obtaining the food itself)
- Preservation (Storing ingredients; preserving methods)
- Preparation (Tuning ingredients into food)
- Presentation (Designing appearance of food and its settings)
- Consumption (Eating—utensils, techniques, styles, manners)
- Clean-up/Disposal (Disposing leftovers, cooking scraps. Dishes.)

**PERFORMANCE**

- Performance (Intentional and unintentional meanings, symbolism)
- Conceptualizations (beliefs, attitudes towards food and eating)
- Contexts (Surroundings for each aspect of foodways)
It goes beyond the consumption of food and includes the product, process, and performance of the material itself. (Dr. Long) Ultimately, this project is calling attention to how food is more than what we eat, and that this is often overlooked in food culture. There has also been a transition to utilizing social media more than before the pandemic in order to socialize and stay connected to others. I chose to use the Instagram platform as the source of my project firstly due to its visual nature, and secondly because Instagram forms natural communities among its followers using algorithms, interactions, and impressions. Utilizing a platform such as Instagram is a beneficial way to collect data because it is a measurable campaign platform. The impressions and interactions with each post and page visit can be collected and used to analyze the campaign’s effectiveness. The number of follows, likes, views, clicks, etc. can be tracked and measured. Social media is flexible and changes can be made accordingly as a result of the found data, in order to make it a more effective campaign.

Methodology: Project Components

The project itself has a designed visual and audio identity to the brand. Every component “lives” on the Instagram account. There are a series of twenty-seven designed posts that work systematically to present information. Each row contains a post that is an inspiring tip to try, a post with an interactive question, and a post of a quote that answers the question, “How have you used food as a tool for comfort during Quarantine?” All nine rows have a designated topic within food culture that it hones in on. The video component of the project elevates it to be very inclusive. The videos can be found under the account’s “Story Highlights” on the profile page, categorized by the occupational identity of the person interviewed. The videos present different perspectives on a specific question within food culture, given the circumstances of the pandemic. These perspectives include a restaurant owner, a healthcare worker, a stay-at-home family, etc. The last component to the project places the design in the users’ hands. Users are encouraged to hashtag QuarantiningAndDining to document their culinary creations, and all tags will be added to the account’s story highlights.

Methodology: Interdisciplinary

The visual approach to the project Quarantining & Dining uses graphic design and food studies as the main disciplinaries. The research utilizes other disciplines in order to guide the methodology and provide content for the campaign. These include the psychology of food, folklore, cultural anthropology, and sociology. These make up a large portion of the research that supports the research question.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The strengths to this project mainly stem out of the platform used to represent the research. Instagram provides a sense of community and comfort through the digital medium, which should be effective in providing strategies for those staying at home to look at food culture from a new perspective. As mentioned previously, the platform is measurable, which means the success of the impressions and interactions can be assessed and the project’s conclusion. The project’s methodology attempts to answer the research question using real interaction and evidence from individuals. This makes the research authentic and diverse in nature. And lastly, the multidisciplinary research background develops a strong foundation upon which the content for the project is created. Using each of these disciplines reduces room for biases or rejections, and rather develops a well-rounded look into food culture and design as a whole.

The limitations of the project are minor in comparison to the strengths, although they are worth noting. The project’s content is relevant to the stay-at-home period, ordered by both state governors and the president. Although the tips, quotes, and ideas prompted by the post content are still applicable beyond the stay-at-home period, they will not be as effective and relevant. It must also be noted that Instagram has a very specific audience to it; this especially misses out on older and younger aged men and women. Instagram is widely known for having youthful, urban demographics for its users. Instagram algorithms play a part in which users and how many see the content created on accounts. New accounts are especially more difficult to get noticed. As accounts gain impressions and internet traffic, they are presented higher up in the hierarchy of the timeline. In other words, it takes time and page popularity in order to get the ball rolling once a new account
is created. Lastly, a downfall to insights in measuring page and post impressions on Instagram is the inability to track demographical information of users. Choosing a platform, such as Facebook, where demographical information can be more easily assessed can help refine the success of the account as well as allow for more conclusions to be drawn.

Conclusions

The last post to the Instagram feed's designed architecture was posted on 5/8/2020. It is still too soon to collect and analyze account insights and impressions. However, so far there have been 210 post likes, 66 account followers, a maximum of 42 story views, and 8 post comments. Although I would have liked to see a larger amount of initial interactions, has provided a good foundation for getting the account running. There is flexibility for more posts to be added to this feed, as the feed's design allows for a continuous flow to be developed and expand the system. The end goal is to help share ideas to others and provide some positivity in this time of uncertainty, and it is safe to say this project has accomplished that for both myself, and others.

In order to view the project in its entirety, follow the link: https://www.instagram.com/quarantininganddining/ or search @quarantininganddining on Instagram

Below is a brief documentation of the collective thesis project.

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Project Branding
“Story Highlights” Video Interviews

Account Homepage on Desktop
**Works Cited**


