Online Quizzes as Viral, Consumption-Based Identities

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Complexities in digital spaces problematize virtual-identity construction. Online commercialization trends that often take the form of native advertisements, including identity quizzes featured on websites such as BuzzFeed, exploit incentives for a branded self and the immaterial labor of users to create and share messages. Thus, identity politics are often depoliticized amid virtual environments that rely on ties between identity and consumption in either native advertisements or copy designed to draw users to advertisements. This article analyzes sponsored and unsponsored quizzes from BuzzFeed and resulting commentaries, arguing that in these cases, identity is often circumscribed around digestible, consumption-based "results." This article also considers how the quiz phenomenon reflects trends in viral native advertising as it pertains to constructing virtual selves.

Keywords: identity, BuzzFeed, identity quizzes, native advertising, virality, digital capitalism, free labor

The ability of digital media users to construct online identities has generated significant musings about the nature of these constructions. Whereas some early Internet scholars originally argued that the digital landscape offered individuals opportunities for fluid identity play (Turkle, 1999), many others now posit that constructions of virtual identity via social networking sites have significant formatting and generic constraints and are driven by formulas designed for monetization (Farquhar, 2013; Ivcevic & Ambady, 2012; Olivier, 2011). The latter includes genre-blurring *native advertising* (Carlson, 2015) and other sponsored elements as a financial strategy for such sites that exploit commercially friendly identity presentations. Even unsponsored copy often fulfills imperatives of digital advertising by attracting visitors and creating comfortable, accessible, and fun content that flows with advertising-based elements. Identities are thus constructed in a strongly commercial environment. When Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other sites give users the tools to construct virtual identities through participation and posting in advertising-funded sites, the audience will be exposed to and even contribute to the advertisement or advertising-favorable Web content, which can be data mined for future targeted advertising. The audience also aids in dissemination through subsequent "likes," comments, and shares of commercially concordant identities, thus implicating them as labor participants in this process. In addition, participating in prepackaged identity declarations fits in well with larger incentivization toward "the branded self," in which

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"promoting and selling himself to others as yet another commodity" (Comor, 2011, p. 20) are rewarded, and success is framed as "dependent, not upon specific skills or motivation, but on the glossy packaging of the self and the unrelenting pursuit of attention" (Hearn, 2008, p. 171).

Becoming prominent in 2014 and continuing as of this writing, quizzes from sites such as BuzzFeed are prevalent tools for the declarations of one's online identity. At the height of their popularity, if you had a Facebook page, you inevitably saw a number of "friends" declaring that they got the color red, they are meant to live in Paris, and they got Willow as their member of the Scooby Gang from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Many who saw their friends' results participated themselves. One newspaper stated that such quizzes "took over" Facebook (Associated Press, 2014). Quiz responses are not right or wrong, but purportedly declare something about the quiz taker, whether about the perceived applicability of the results themselves to the taker's interests or personality, or the spirit of fun and community in which quizzes are located. Sometimes quizzes are "sponsored" or "promoted": the result of native advertising deals with BuzzFeed marketers. Sometimes, they are generated by BuzzFeed employees or by users who receive no direct monetary compensation. Nor do BuzzFeed quizzes stand alone: Other quiz-generating sites such as Zimbio and PlayBuzz follow a similar formula.

Identity quizzes flow well with digital monetization because they appear to serve the needs of users through giving them shareable, simple, prepackaged content that allows them to easily represent their self-brand to friends and/or followers (e.g., Willow from *Buffy*) in a highly accessible, fun, and playful way. Online identity quizzes, then, are contradictory: They offer voluntary and fun chances for self-declaration—and accompanying commentary about these declarations—and are seemingly individualized but occur in constrained and commercialized environments. Their success depends on how the quizzes integrate with the larger commercial incentives of the site, but also must appeal to unpaid online users and encourage sharing, liking, and commenting that can cause the quizzes to be spread throughout the Web, thus generating the "buzz" for sites such as BuzzFeed.

In this article, we explore issues of digital identity and sponsorship with a specific focus on four television-based BuzzFeed quizzes. The popular culture focus of these quizzes, as argued later, is typical of many such quizzes. Two of them are sponsored (as examples of native advertising), and two are unsponsored, although still arguably "complementary copy" (Andersen, 1995) that flows with commercial incentives of the website. BuzzFeed was chosen as a locus because it quickly established itself as a leader in viral native advertising-based formats. Although such viral identity materials may be sites of playful interaction and act as opportunities for identity commentary and community building, they also are limited by commercial imperatives in terms of the range of materials provided. Therefore, we argue that quizzes create an environment that encourages embracing consumer culture and values, rather than continual critical reflections on commodities and identity.

Capital and the Colonization of Identity Aims

The monetization of websites using native advertising both converges and clashes with issues of postmillennial online identity. The "informational capitalist" (Arvidsson, 2006) culture has offered creation and distribution tools that can promise both virtual, multimodal, and flexible representations of identity

while also incentivizing neoliberal, consumerist representations. A move to craft one's virtual selves, disseminate the selves, and connect with other like-selves may open spaces of political and ideological activity that facilitate group members to critically engage the identity politics inherent in the corporeal everyday, just as certain online fan communities may illustrate (Duits, Zwaan, & Reijinders, 2014). Yet, the commercial nature of many sites may result in identities that mirror corporate branding symbols and techniques that "work to colonize the lived experience of consumers in the interest of capital accumulation" (Hearn, 2008, p. 166). Mainstream online sites may exploit the cultural moment that insists on a self-brand and consequently take possession of the flexible, fluid, and nuanced nature of postmodern identity in an effort to make digital identity appear fluid while really being constrained by commercial imperatives of creating comfortable, easily distributable, and potentially viral content. This context may also disseminate static identities that assist in the perpetuation of postclassist, postracist, and postfeminist mythos that minimizes systemic oppressions from which everyday discriminations arise.

This contradictory nature of online spaces and incidences of identity constructions of race, sexual orientation, and gender are often highlighted by scholars as "digital stigmas" (Trottier, 2013), and they have diversified effects across audiences. Nakamura (2014) examines "scambaiters"—those who pretend to be vulnerable to Internet scams to drain scammers' time and resources—arguing that although viral meme circulation "builds feelings of identification and connection with specific online communities" (p. 269), many scambaiter-produced viral memes are created from White anxiety that insists people of color "perform themselves as primitive" (p. 271). Similar contradictions of virtual identity liberation and play alongside a reification of hegemonic identity performances have been discussed in regards to online gay cruising communities (McGlotten, 2013), cyberfeminist spaces (Van Zoonen, 2002), and within gender queer chat rooms (Van Doorn, Wyatt, & Van Zoonen, 2008).

Simply, theorization of cyberspaces quickly moved from sites of flexible and liberating identity potentiality to spaces capitalized on by mechanisms of restriction and information transmission found in the corporeal everyday. In the case of commercial places (such as BuzzFeed, Facebook, and LinkedIn), another element that adds layers of complication to digital identity construction is the promotional ethos that permeates such locales. Identity tools produced by native advertisers or serving as clickbait for advertising-infused sites are, like the reality television craze before it, "producing texts or ideologies but also working to model the monetization of 'being' and the production of subjectivity" (Hearn, 2011, p. 315). Given the importance of this online context, how might we understand the commercial incentives in which identity tools often are proliferated and disseminated?

Native Advertising, Virality, and BuzzFeed: Monetizing Play in "Fun" Spaces

The strategy of *native advertising*—sponsored Web content camouflaging as or integrating with editorial content (Carlson, 2015)—is not new despite its origin as a postmillennial term. "Reading notices" in newspapers in the early 1900s (Lawson, 1988) and sponsored programs in early broadcast network radio (Meyers, 2011) are precursors to blended digital advertising forms. However, digital media have fully embraced the idea of camouflaged ads, despite the stated ethic in traditional media of a divide between editorial content and advertising (Spurgeon, 2008). In digital media, native advertising may take the form of sponsor-created webpage news stories, games, or other multimodal features. Often native

advertising is labeled in some way, but such labeling is non-standardized and influenced by commercial incentives, typically not even using the obvious descriptor *advertising* (Marshall, 2014; Sebastian, 2015). BuzzFeed itself indicated native advertisements in 2014 with a red banner that read "sponsored content," but by Spring 2015, the labeling had shifted to the more-muted, yellow-bannered "promoted." This change accompanied a sharp increase in BuzzFeed's estimated ad revenue, with monetization more than doubling in just two years (Kafka, 2013).

U.S. native advertising spending exceeded $4 billion in 2015 and 58% of surveyed marketers reported using native advertising within the past year (Infographic, 2015). Yet, the form has generated discussion of ethical and legal issues (Carlson, 2015), including from the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, an agency concerned with consumers' ability to distinguish advertising from editorial pieces (Steigrad, 2013). Such trends accentuate the larger movement in the political economy of digital media whereby data are collected about users for targeted advertising and distinctions between promotional and non-promotional content are eroded (Turow, 2011).

Native advertising is not just designed to grab a user's attention, but also to encourage "click-throughs" that move the user to a marketer's website or e-commerce opportunity, and to be so "native" to the user's experience as to encourage a voluntary sharing of the promotional message on various social media sites and platforms (Smith, 2013). User sharing of promotional content on social media leads to increased attentiveness and credibility and, through use of cookies and other identifiers, generates databases of consumer behaviors that may be sold or *hashed*, a term applied to native advertising on Facebook (Heyman & Pierson, 2013). Sharing as a form of labor is especially key for native advertising in general and quizzes in particular. BuzzFeed founder Jonah Peretti pointedly states that sharing on social networks is more important than direct BuzzFeed.com traffic, because sharing globally propels content at astounding rates (virality) and accounts for over half of BuzzFeed's users (Shontell, 2012).

Users who share such content become, in essence, distributors of the advertising message, thus creating a force of "immaterial labor" that "produces not only commodities, but also capital relation" (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 137). Identity quizzes, discussed in detail below, are ripe vessels for such aims. The free labor involved in the circulation of identity quizzes, as another example of viral circulation of capital relation, is disguised under the pretenses of fun, affect, and belonging. Therefore, the work of the audience is both "pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (Terranova, 2000, p. 37). In the case of identity quizzes, such labor could include contributions to data mining and the posting of quiz results and quiz invitations on other sites, as stated above. In addition, completing the quiz, making comments that express fandom, and sharing results on social media with fan-framing commentary can serve as endorsements of both the brands embedded in the quiz and of the original website that hosted the quiz.

BuzzFeed has applied these user-labor logics as a foundation to grow in popularity and profitability. The site was ranked 15 in 2016 on Quantcast's top sites list. By 2016, BuzzFeed (2016) reported more than 200 million monthly visitors to its site. Its revenue increased from $40 million in 2013 to a projected $250 million in 2016 (Kosoff, 2016; O'Reilly, 2013). BuzzFeed's impressive profit is garnered solely through native advertising (Gara, 2013), making virality (user labor through sharing) the

center of its success. To attract a diversity of users through an amalgamation of clickbait that enhances the chances of items going viral, the site's staff concocts a recipe that resembles an all-you-can eat, soup-to-nuts buffet. BuzzFeed's page changes throughout the day and mixes serious news, consumer-based lists and quizzes, and sponsored items. The BuzzFeed homepage from May 24, 2014—the height of identity quiz's popularity—gives visitors a vast selection of sidebar materials, including

- Breaking news: "Mass Murder: Drive-by rampage in California leaves 7 dead";
- "Big" news stories;
- Entertainment listicles, including a Pennzoil-sponsored "13 struggles only car lovers understand";
- GIF collections, including "For everyone whose sexual awakening was caused by David Bowie in 'Labyrinth'";
- Video clips;
- "Fre.sh on BuzzFeed," a category with items such as swimsuits mom should not wear and a quiz asking which "classic Hollywood actress" a user is;
- "Fre.sh on the web" that displays content from BuzzFeed's partners;
- Clickable yellow buttons where users may select content that is labeled as "LOL, win, OMG, cute, trashy, fail, or WTF."

By coalescing a variety of information, stitched together with collected images, GIFs, and videos, BuzzFeed is able to "create relatable and noncontroversial articles that get millions of views" (Carver, 2014, para. 8), thus offering advertiser-friendly clickbait, despite BuzzFeed's editor-in-chief's assertion that the site strays from such "tempting, vacuous, 'curiosity gap' headlines" (Hamblin, 2014, para. 11). However, the journalism/clickbait/native advertising incentives create unusual bedmates. The utilization of familiar images and the seemingly paradoxical placement of headlines declaring the death of seven alongside David Bowie's role in sexual awakening are not only a means to connect people (largely through the power of "share" and "retweet"), they are also an attempt to subtly frame the site as consumption-oriented, thus "naturalizing" the "native" advertising (Pennzoil and car struggles) while serving users with a platter of shock, sexuality, and identity claims that entice them to keep clicking and, more important, sharing toward virality.

Quizzes such as the "Hollywood actress" item above may be especially valuable to BuzzFeed's economic logic. When BuzzFeed strayed from quiz production, the site experienced a 55% decrease in Facebook shares between March and May 2014. A lack of quiz production was cited as the cause of their fall (Shontell, 2014). Quizzes fit in well with native advertising incentives because their frequently consumer-culture orientation lends themselves both to the integration of sponsors' brands and to the creation of unsponsored quizzes that thematically flow with nearby sponsored items. But quizzes also are highly shareable content for many users, a characteristic that speaks to their implications for fun identity declaration and construction. In fact, quizzes highlight the exploitation of identity navigation in the digital economy that serves the one-dimensional aims of capital while under the guise of play, understanding the self, fluid and fun identity construction, and connection to social in-groups.

BuzzFeed identity quizzes therefore engage the contradictions of online identity construction by inviting consumption-based identity branding within a format that could allow for critical discussion of

identity politics of the everyday. In a 2014 interview, Sherry Turkle spoke to the polysemic nature of these quizzes, arguing that they offer "people something to look at, an object to think with" but nevertheless serve as a point of at least mild self-reflection and presentation (Turkle, quoted in Faircloth, 2014, para. 4). In this way, quizzes represent how cyberspaces both replicate hegemonic identity politics present in the corporeal everyday while simultaneously offering opportunities for digital identity play. As such, they become complex sites for theoretical generalizations or manifestations, illustrating ways we construct virtual selves and how those selves configure into concerns regarding privacy, virality, and self-branding for various purposes. Importantly, digital quizzes' reification of hegemonic ideology regarding "proper" identity performance and social ordering through intersectional discourse from the quiz and the resulting discussion are a trend found in analogue precursors when users reacted to representations of identity in traditional media such as magazines (Duke & Kreshel, 1998; Wolf, 1991). However, the digital identity quizzes differ from their ancestors in that they are more likely to be shared with wider audiences and thus are more likely to become a component (granted one of many) to a user's self-brand while existing as a tool of significant monetization and data mining. These quizzes, although centering identity on the surface, are generated from commercial imperatives—either as native advertisements themselves or as features designed to serve as complementary copy to other native advertising elements (Andersen, 1995). For example, "top-10" lists of the best BuzzFeed quizzes of 2014 focused on highly consumer-oriented topics such as Disney princesses, popular television shows and films, pop stars, living locales, and cheese. Arguably, only two "top" quizzes addressed governmental politics ("Which U.S. President Are You?") or social/economic societies ("Which Member of the Illuminati Are You?"; Rossi & Gui, 2014; Verhoeven, 2014).

Identity quizzes, such as the four we analyze from BuzzFeed, are similarly contradictory: They have gender-, race-, and class-based implications but frame these elements in ways that subtly support social "ideals" (hyperfemininity, for example) by downplaying the implications of identity and emphasizing their consumerist nature. Indeed, such quizzes aim to be highly digestible across identity borders such as class and gender to aid the viral potential through user labor for native advertising from which production sites such as BuzzFeed capitalize.

Method

We examined four BuzzFeed quizzes—two sponsored and two unsponsored—to explore the interplay between promotion and identity through analyzing the format of the quiz via BuzzFeed design models as well as audience reactions/commentary to the quiz. Two of the quizzes are connected to specific television programs: the short-lived *Jennifer Falls* ("What Kind of Roommate Are You?" sponsored by TV Land, originally posted on May 29, 2014; TV Land, 2014) and the successful *Orange Is the New Black* (*OITNB*; "Which 'Orange Is the New Black' Inmate Are You?," unsponsored, originally posted on June 10, 2014; Davis, Telling, Chen, & Clayton, 2014). Two others focus on the cable television channel The Food Network: "Which Food Network All-Star Would Be Your Mentor?" (sponsored by The Food Network, originally posted on February 21, 2015; BuzzFeed, 2015) and "Which Food Network Chef Is Your

Spirit Animal?" (unsponsored, originally posted on January 4, 2013; Sanders, 2013).[1] Although the two program-based quizzes are centered in the following analysis—largely because their content explicitly tackles identity markers such as race, gender, and class and may inspire audience repurposing of content given this—the food-centric quizzes are also closely analyzed and discussed in footnotes to deepen review of quiz content and audience reaction to said content.

Through examining native advertisements and unsponsored but complementary quizzes, we hope to illustrate the manner in which the majority of content is created to draw users to advertisements or to create an advertising-friendly pool of content. Quizzes were chosen because of their focus on television, a medium that in the digital era has further increased its traditionally heavy use of program and network promotion (Gray, 2008; Lotz, 2007). They also offer an iconography of branded popular culture that complements the native advertising environment of BuzzFeed.

To address the constraints and contradictions of identity construction in these quizzes, we analyzed each question asked through the quiz, the answers available for audience members to choose from, the imagery that accompanied each question, and the nature of results that taking the quiz generated. When analyzing the quiz itself, we looked specifically at aspects of the quiz that either encouraged consumption through the questions asked (e.g., choose a shampoo fragrance) or used consumption as the decisive factor in generating results through answer selection (e.g., items to buy at a prison commissary). When analyzing quiz results posted by participants, we paid particular attention to the language that described the identity result and the type of stance the official description implied or stated outright about the desirability of the result.

We were interested in exploring not only the interplay between identity and consumption as created by BuzzFeed, but also how users responded to the quizzes and their results. We paid special attention to comments, or lack thereof, posted by participants or other users commenting on another participant's quiz results. Did they allow the results to speak of their persona, thus creating a kind of salient identity marker for their self-brand? Did they critique any part of the quiz? Did they speak back to the quiz, particularly aspects of the quiz that glazed over corporeal identity markers in favor of a playful, virtual border crossing? We therefore completed a close reading of every comment and reply and considered which initial comments received the most replies. Following this reading, we found that the great majority of user engagement with the quiz could often be categorized into what we refer to the "share, compare, and discuss" rubric. This includes a simple copy and paste of the result with no personalized commentary (share), paste of the result with engagement of applicability to the self (compare), or paste of the result and its use to discuss fandom of the television programs (discuss). In total, we analyzed 267 comments, including initial comments and the reactions to these comments over four quizzes.

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[1] Individual authors are listed for the unsponsored quizzes; sponsored quizzes seem to be attributed to the sponsoring company as a "brand publisher."

Roommate and Inmates—Quizzing for Identity With Television Brands

The TV Land-sponsored "What Kind of Roommate Are You?" quiz is a native advertisement for the cable network's soon-cancelled program *Jennifer Falls*, in which main character Jennifer and her teenage daughter are forced to move in with Jennifer's mother after a rage-induced fall from grace that cost Jennifer her high-earning legal career. The only element that distinguishes this quiz from unsponsored quizzes is a thumbnail above the questions that features the TV Land logo with the euphemistic label "Brand Publisher" below it and a sidebar that promotes only materials from TV Land as opposed to the mishmash of materials from BuzzFeed that accompanies unsponsored quizzes.

Although scholars assert that consumption has long been a telling aspect of one's identity (Campbell, 1995; Jackson, 1999; Sørensen & Thomsen, 2006; Warde, 1994), and certainly users may add comments that critically deconstruct their or others' quiz results or even the quiz itself, nevertheless quizzes' premises, questions, responses, canned results, and overall brand-oriented environments seem to encourage a shift away from creative uses and appropriations of commodities as a site of agentic repurposing of consumer culture (Hebdige, 1979) to acceptance of commodity and consumption as is intended by their makers (Lury, 1996). In the "roommate" quiz, for example, two of 10 questions were based on consumption or commodities: "Youre [*sic*] starving and you find pizza left out. What do you do?" and "Choose a shampoo fragrance." Another presents commodities as choices: Options for "How did you meet your current roommate?" include "Facebook" and "Craigslist." Not surprising, the sponsored Food Network All-Star quiz has consumption-based questions about preferred food aromas (choices include lasagna and hamburger), style of parties, and choices of spoons, although specific brands are not included.

The possible answers to these questions are not open-ended, but instead are a limited number of multiple-choice responses. Users' results are therefore dependent on circumscribed consumption habits, which can be used by digital citizens as a statement of who they are and as tools for comparison with members of a quiz-taking in-group. The results are then categorized and standardized into upbeat and playful labels depending on the combination of responses, including "The Perfect Roommate" and "The BFF." With The Food Network quizzes, the results are specific celebrity chefs on that network, such as Bobby Flay. Aside from taking the quiz, adding comments, and posting results on social media sites such as Facebook, BuzzFeed also allows users to rate the quiz according to BuzzFeed's system (LOL, OMG), and share their results in the "Facebook conversations" section following the quiz, thus providing an apt platform for in-group identification and social comparison. In this particular quiz, the common mode of comment is a quick copy and paste, with occasional personal elaborations. Commenter Nae,[2] for example, pasted the "perfect roommate" results and Mark confirmed a similar identity with "me too."

A minority of commenters (three of 28) expressed disdain for the quiz.[3] Carly wrote, "This quiz is so stupid. Also it makes no sense at all"; Fatima wrote in apparent disagreement with the results, "I am

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[2] All comments exist on a publically accessible forum, but names in this article are pseudonyms.

[3] This trend is replicated in Food Network's sponsored "Mentor" quiz. Here, two of 36 comments expressed disdain for this quiz, particularly because their favorite chef was not a possible result. One of the 36

the roommate who will punch you in the face for eating my food" (TV Land, 2014). The ethical implications of this response ("Does a roommate eat your food? If so, do you retaliate with violence?") were certainly stated but left undiscussed, flavoring the quiz with more fun consumption. The commentary therefore presents a discourse centered largely on agreement with or agitation about the quiz. That the quiz was sponsored did not seem to stifle sharing results through social media networks, although the relative unpopularity of the program may have. BuzzFeed's Facebook Quiz page shows that the quiz had been shared 64 times through its site. In addition, the Facebook page hosted 50 comments (adding to BuzzFeed.com's 28) and saw 176 likes (TV Land, 2014).

The unsponsored quiz from June 2014 centered in this analysis focused on a popular Netflix-based television program: "Which 'Orange Is the New Black' Inmate Are You?" The quiz received much more activity than the TV Land-sponsored quiz, likely reflecting the different popularity of the two programs. As an unsponsored quiz, it represents the "complementary copy" that encourages users to "click through" the site and thus be exposed to native advertising. Despite being unsponsored, the quiz emphasized commodity elements more within both the questions asked of participants and their responses than the sponsored TV quiz, thus making consumption a more salient feature of identity. Five of the 10 questions from the *OITNB* quiz centered on consumption/commodities ("What would you buy at commissary?" "What would you get smuggled in?" "Pick a prison food"; "Which movie would you watch?" "Pick a prison tattoo"), as opposed to two of 10 in TV Land's quiz (Davis et al., 2014). Each question was accompanied by a photo of an *OITNB* character, solidifying its promotional aspect. As an unsponsored quiz, its consumption orientation—being about a television program on a subscription-based streaming service and using upbeat commodity-based quiz items—naturalizes the sponsored quizzes and other forms of native advertising on BuzzFeed. The questions and choices, based on "fun consumption" and/or minor inconveniences of incarceration, mask the dehumanizing realities of prison that, ironically, the program itself often explores.

This trend is also seen in the sponsored and unsponsored Food Network quizzes, with more consumption/commodity-centered questions found in the unsponsored rather than the sponsored versions. The unsponsored Food Network "Spirit Animal" quiz included such choices as "Which dessert speaks to your soul?" (Krispy Kreme bread pudding being an option) and "Who do you most deeply identify with?"; the latter included popular culture choices such as Yoda and J. R. Ewing. Signaling the promotionally friendly nature of this unsponsored quiz, two years later, The Food Network's website featured its own version of "Which Food Network Chef Is Your Spirit Animal?" with different questions and options (Russo, 2015).

Unlike the sponsored TV Land quiz, many of the *OITNB* comments engage consumer culture as a site where goods are not only used but where meaning is produced through their acquirement (Lury, 1996), particularly as it pertains to the production of a notably gendered and public virtual body and ego. Abigail, whose result was *OITNB* character Poussey, said, "I'll never admit how many times I flip flopped between floss & makeup." Karlie responded to Abigail's comment, writing, "I did, too. I have to say that

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comments did not share, compare, or discuss pop culture nor express disdain; instead, the commentator mentioned dislike of peppers.

makeup actually won, and I floss much more than I primp." The consumption-based commentary, revolving around physical presentation (an especially fascinating trend considering the majority female cast and commentators), even touches on body-modification commodities. One commenter (Tara) wrote, "I got Rosa, which is fucking awesome, but I wish the prison tattoo question had actual prison tattoos instead of professional ones. They are very different." Her declaration tells us that if she does not identify as a member of the tattooed community, she, at the very least, consumes tattoos to a point that, to her trained eyes, the form and style of the markings differ based on the locale and tools used to apply the work. Karlie and Abigail reminded readers that primping, although done less than flossing, is essential to their adoption of gendered body norms. Thus, their corporeal rituals assist in the establishment/production of their virtual (and, as a result of their participation in BuzzFeed Facebook commentary, viral) identities.

Those who posted their results without elaboration seemed to let these results speak for themselves (or perhaps speak about themselves) as key identity-construction materials; as with all of the quizzes, the results seemed unique—"You got: Piper"—yet are circumscribed within a limited universe of results (major *OITNB* inmates). The descriptions of all the characters-as-users are gratifying and positive, even for characters often positioned in the program as antagonistic. If a user's result was the religious zealot Pennsatucky, for example, the description starts off, "There is nothing more important to you than your convictions." Thus, the quiz results, when shared, exist as a kind of testament to how users see themselves both corporeally and virtually or how they desire to see themselves.

Others elaborated in ways that not only provided additional details about the constructed identification, but also displayed their fandom of the program. For example, Scott, a White male according to his public profile photo, declared that he was the then-new character Soso, an Asian American female. Although his post (a copy and paste of his results) offered no personal reaction to his result, it spurred a comment thread whereby readers professed their love or dislike of the newcomer character.[4] Other commenters' reactions to the result, such as a one-liner that only viewers who have progressed to specific episodes will understand ("I like the fact that she stands up to authority, she just needs to shut up a bit more"), affirmed a popular culture literacy that positions strangers into spaces of belonging by using their consumption of the show as bonding material. Such discussion thus combines identity declaration with publicity-sparking TV fan discourse that embraces the anticipation of viewing future episodes, the latter a promotional trend noted about fan review websites such as Televisionwithoutpity.com (Andrejevic, 2008).[5] The great majority of comments seemed to flow with a "fan/consumption" ethos of the quiz.

Yet, there was a palpable silence in the generous comment thread. Users avoided (or perhaps failed to see) the ways in which this result—once shared—becomes a digital artifact that speaks to border crossing between gender, race, and ability (Soso's incarceration as mobility restriction). This result illustrates the fluid identity play posited by early Internet theorists and provides for us a space where we can begin to interrogate how such movement is possible in virtual realms while constricted in physical

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[4] All *OITNB* commentary is from Davis et al. (2014).

[5] This is supported in both the sponsored ("Mentor") and unsponsored ("Spirit Animal") Food Network quizzes, with replies and comments discussing which chef is their favorite and why.

realms. Indeed, of 173 analyzed[6] *OITNB* comments, only two respondents (discussed below) engaged a dialogue that explicitly engaged the quiz and identities beyond a mere share and compare method. Revisiting the quiz in early 2015 supported that this trend continued, revealing that 75% of Facebook comments following the quiz focused on sharing or comparing. Sharing, for example, is a quick copy and paste of the result ("I got Gloria"); sharing the result with a brief affirmation of that result ("Great!" or "I'm totally ok with that!"); or sharing and expressing disdain for the result ("NOOOOOO I got Pennsatucky"). Comparing took forms such as sharing the result with a quick elaboration about how users see themselves ("Yep, I'm a little crazy" or "That sounds exactly like me") or sharing the result and offering personal appreciation of the character ("Alex Vause—oh the sexiness" or "I got Gloria! She's one of my favorites and also, kinda like a voodoo queen"). A majority of the remaining 25% focused on discussing popular culture through comments and replies that focused on literacy of *OITNB* content.[7]

Yet, there are many opportunities in the aforementioned commentary that are ripe for nuanced and critical engagement that destabilizes the status quo and denaturalizes comfortable, advertising-friendly copy that avoids nuance. For example, Alex appreciated for her "sexiness" could be interrogated for its objectifying nature. Similarly, the comment that positioned Gloria as a "voodoo queen" is fertile for discussions of the Western (read: Hollywood) appropriation of Haitian Vodou that "has power in the imaginations of many, in spite of the fact that it has little or no basis in fact" that is "manifested as lurid fantasies about black peoples" (McGee, 2012, p. 232). However, such critiques, or overt politicizations of the quiz and the following commentary, are not engaged en masse on this particular forum (the Facebook conversations section on BuzzFeed.com). The format appears to stifle nuanced discussion of identity because even antagonistic results (i.e., "You got: An Unlikeable Character") are coded in a highly flattering light, and results—while featuring visual representations of *OITNB* characters—do not engage race, gender, sexuality, class, or ability beyond the image of the celebrity. Similarly, even questions and answers that do not center consumption speak to a ludic, nonthreatening modality that exists in a space beyond—or not influenced by—inequality or injustice, despite the extreme yet unstated and therefore abstract presence of class, gender, race, and ability in many questions and answers. For example, the *OITNB* quiz asks, "What would you be arrested for?" and offers the following choices: "being too smart," "being too funny," "being too fierce," "keeping it too real," "being too fab," "being too romantic," "being too high," "releasing the animals in the zoo," or "I wouldn't get arrested." The format serves to downplay the seriousness of societal differences, in this case, who and/or what bodies are likely to be at risk for arrest and surveillance.

There are occasional moments, however, when discussion begins to engage more overtly ideological frameworks, such as with the terror-laden existence in prison. Ryan, for example, wrote, "Worked in a state pen for awhile, really not that romantic." Similarly, Arnold remarked, "Was it hard for

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[6] In June 2014, there were 139 comments. In January 2015, this number increased to 195; only 173 were accessible.

[7] All quizzes support this trend. Some 91% of comments and replies following the *Jennifer Falls* quiz supported the share, compare, and discuss rubric; 88% of comments and replies following the "Mentor" quiz supported the share, compare, and discuss rubric; 90% of comments and replies following the "Spirit Animal" quiz supported the share, compare, and discuss rubric.

anyone else to take this quiz? I kept pausing because it was hard for me to picture myself in prison! AAHHH real fear swept over me as I chose a prison weapon." Yet, discussion in these cases was not engaged by others: As of March 2016, no commentator responded to either.

Taking the quiz itself could be interpreted as mildly subversive, both for the linkage to criminality and, even more, for those with quiz results that contrasted with other identity markers—the male who "got [the female inmate] Soso." In one instance, this identity play led to a significant exchange about the politics of identity. Jake, a Black male, posted his result as Piper, a White female, to which he commented, "Shared this result with my mom, during our daily conversation, and she was like 'could you BE any more white?' To which I replied, according to BuzzFeed . . . not really." Jake's reply to his initial copy and paste post was the only comment that reached beyond the majority share and compare formula to receive a reply. Abbie wrote,

> Ahaha! Well I think she's the best character—intellectual, not creepy or dangerous, etc— although people seem to hate her?!? I can't see myself as another character to be honest. . . . After all, I am WHITE and BLONDE ;) Haha just kidding. I like the latina with tear tattoos + I speak Spanish sooo :D I think I hate Vee the most, and Suzanne is sooo horrible this season!

This dialogue provides an example of discussions of race as an important component of identity in both corporeal and virtual realms. First, Jake declared, presumably as a joke, the Whiteness of Piper, who indeed could stand as a poster child for conceptual whiteness aside from her ongoing love affair with a female (Carter, 2007; Dyer, 1997). This was met with a racially coded defense of Piper as "intellectual, not creepy or dangerous," although Piper's upper-middle-class status, not available to all inmates as indicated through their background stories, contributes to her book smarts. After Abbie declared that she could not see herself as another character, she is WHITE and BLONDE after all, she worked toward the alleviation of racial tensions by declaring that she likes the Latina with tear tattoos, but does not know the character's name—although liking the character is not the same as sharing part of your identity as the character. In Abbie's brief paragraph, Whiteness is called out, defended, and an attempt at racial tolerance is indicated by mentioning the "Latina with the tear tattoos." Her response is fertile ground for discussion, and Jake does reply. He said,

> My mom and I get along pretty well, but I think it's hard for her to grasp that our attitudes about race are different because our upbringings were very different. She lived in a black neighborhood, went to a black school, and attended an HBCU. I lived in a practically all white neighborhood, was often the only black kid in my class, and went to a University where maybe 1 out of every 400 people was black. And no one ever made a big deal about it. To her being black is a part of her identity as a person. To me it's just a skin tone, and that's because I've never really [had] blackness come up as either an advantage or disadvantage at any point. It's just impossible for me to harbor any sort of negativity about white people when my life has been 99% white and I've pretty much had what you could call a privileged existence the whole time. I can't count the number of times people bent the rules for me growing up.

What we see is that the digital construction of selfhood, when derived from native advertisers in the clickbait business, is often presented as a popular culture icon that can be aspired to by any user, but remains largely "one dimensional" (Marcuse, 1991) and flattering in its conceptualization and declaration of identity. Simply, the experiences of everyday life, which are inherently political and contradictory (Lefebvre, 2002), seem intentionally depoliticized in this particular space of virtual body and ego branding via the logics of native advertising—even when the particular feature is not sponsored—as technological advances (such as the Internet) are used by capital toward the goal of social cohesion (Marcuse, 1991) through consumption-centered identity construction. In the case of the BuzzFeed quizzes, such depoliticization is not mandated, but seems generally accepted. Jake and Abbie's exchange was the only thread that began to approach the complex political nature of existing in a digital economy that eradicates static identifications (Black and White) while simultaneously urging for them (Piper is blonde and White after all) for purposes of virality that offers clever Web producers incredible profit.

At once Jake speaks to systemic inequity ("went to a University where maybe 1 out of every 400 people was black") while disavowing racial difference as an indicator of societal treatment, thus illustrating the contradictory nature of life and identity in the everyday. Yet, the political, social, and/or cultural opportunity for a critique and subsequent reflection of life in the everyday corporeal world is stifled in favor of more comfortable, surface-level (and commercially complementing) declarations of digital identity that are highly relatable (anyone who has seen *OITNB* comes to the quiz results with program literacy) and free of discussion that centers systems of inequity and marginalization, despite the fact that *OITNB* consistently highlights such issues in the show. This becomes especially salient as a later revisiting[8] of the quiz's commentary reveals that the dialogue between Jake and Abbie disappeared. Yet, other previously analyzed commentary still existed and the Facebook conversation comments increased in number.[9]

Therefore, not only do such quizzes create and spread widely digestible virtual identities, but in some cases uncomfortable elements of identity navigation may be removed so that the "branded self" (Hearn, 2008) remains crafted in the spirit of fun that avoids sometimes painful and nuanced discussion while assisting viral aims toward increased monetization through native advertising. Similarly, the fun that these quizzes arise out of does the ideological work of giving users a means to deny the free labor they are completing for Web profiteers. Furthermore, the differences between identity play in virtual worlds and in corporeal realms seem to suggest a divide between the two that ignores their inherent connection, thus potentially romanticizing one realm while damning the other. In this way, many of these quiz results contribute to the propagation of mythologies that position our increasingly transnational cultures as postracial (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), postfeminist (Press, 2011), postclassist, and the like. These quizzes allow any user to be any character: Jake, a Black man, can be Piper, a White woman. Yet, discussion that deeply engages the identity politics of such results appears stifled in favor of creating a space that draws a vast audience through eliminating content that could offend or make uncomfortable because such results and commentary may decrease potentialities toward virality and subsequent click-throughs. The often

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[8] The original commentary analysis was completed between June 9 and June 11, 2014. When the quiz was revisited on July 4, 2014, this comment thread was no longer available.

[9] The Food Network quizzes support this trend. The unsponsored "Spirit Animal" quiz saw one commentator (of 30) who said, "Alton Brown, but I'm a girl." This comment received no likes or replies.

one-dimensional nature of identity markers based on popular culture references are, at best, the evoking of an algorithm—in the case of digital culture, a literal algorithm (Hallinan & Striphas, 2014)—that bespeaks conformity and simulated agency defined wholly by choices and results often preselected by corporate interests.

Conclusion

As the world becomes increasingly mediated by digital technologies, the corporeal and the virtual speak to and through one another to complicate any distinct boundaries that may have previously existed. This becomes especially prevalent as sites such as BuzzFeed have created spaces where identity construction flourishes as it is largely inclusive and participatory for users. But advertising flourishes as well, and the presence of sponsored content may influence other unsponsored content elements. The production of digital subjectivities that emphasize play and belonging through the dissemination of the icons and language of capitalist culture industries underplay contradictions and marginalizations, a trend we discovered on BuzzFeed's Facebook commentary section. The answers to quiz questions or the information regarding which listicles are most shared are, in the eyes of marketers and advertisers, pure (and mineable) gold at virtually no cost. Furthermore, as briefly mentioned above, a great deal of traditional costs and labor associated with advertising is alleviated as the audience becomes the oft-uncompensated creators of content. Nor is content creation the only way in which quiz takers labor; they also act as laborers through their production of data, sharing the quiz, and tagging other users to take the quiz. Their reward for such labor is a little box one can share, tweet, or pin that says "I got Piper" or "I should live in Paris," as well as the gratifying compensation of fun social comparison where "friends" can bond over shared results or discuss what differences are inherent within their newest commodity-based, one-dimensional identifier.

What has been established is a new form of connective ritual that emphasizes play, identity, and group belonging based on highly digestible results that often aid in the cultural climate of posts that make invisible identity-based discriminations we must draw attention to. Although this article focuses solely on BuzzFeed and its partners, we acknowledge the ways in which such discussion may impact corporeal realms as the lines between the virtual and the "real" are increasingly blurred. Meanwhile, BuzzFeed has become a leader in digital monetization through native advertising, as indicated by its training program, labeled "social storytelling" (designed to facilitate native advertising), whereby "participating agencies will receive extensive training from the BuzzFeed creative team that works exclusively on branded content over the course of three to six months" (Sebastian, 2013, para. 7). Therefore, BuzzFeed's formula toward economic return may become a new model for capital exploits in a digital promotional culture, encouraging us to turn a critical eye to the implications of digital monetization aims that attempt to cash in on identity.

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[10] All BuzzFeed references include retrieval dates because of the fluid nature of the online sourcing.

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