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Shitty Food Porn & Humor-Mediated  
Authenticity Within Digital Communities of  
Ugly Eating

By

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## **Introduction**

First coined in 1979, “food porn” is a term that has undergone great change in the intervening decades but has come to currently define a dominant genre of digital food media with explicit focus on presenting rich visual details and luxurious aesthetics in accordance with desirable eating (McBride 2010, 38). In time with the wider rise in popularity of online food media food porn has come to be a dominant cultural force with the power to shape and reinforce normative notions of “correct” eating (Lupton 2020; Goodman & Jaworska 2020).

In its wake a digital foil has emerged, colloquially known as “shitty food porn.” Shitty food porn is intended to highlight food in its ugly, incorrect, and otherwise “shitty” permutations with the poster knowing and intending for it to be perceived as such. This research seeks to better understand how shitty food porn exists as an online social space, including how shitty food porn is communally constructed by the space's participants, through ethnographic observations of the 2.4 million user r/shittyfoodporn subreddit, a user-moderated and subject specific forum hosted on the website Reddit.

In doing so, I argue that shitty food porn is an online community of authenticity, one that mediates representations of authentically bad cooking not through valorization of its raw qualities but instead through the comedy of its errors. This humor-mediated authenticity forms as a distinct response to a perceived inauthenticity and the insurmountable production barriers of traditional food porn spaces, with the comedy of failed food both mediating and regulating the types of authentic performance that are then permitted by the community. By using humor as opposed to valorization its mediating agent, shitty food porn is able to escape many of the pitfalls seen in other online communities of authenticity and uniquely negotiate the divide between authentic and inauthentic representations of food.

Within one side of the community, a commiserative environment akin to a digital cult of affliction emerges, where users situate their food posts in the context of its shittiness, be it attributed to poverty, mental health struggles, or simply lacking the time for a proper meal. Other users evaluate these circumstances as an affliction on the original poster, should they agree that the circumstances justify the shittiness of the meal, offer support and advice from their own experiences, ultimately forming a sort of community of support born of mutual societal affliction.

Inversely, there are users who seem to use the humor-mediated authenticity of shitty food porn towards counter-cultural aims, wearing the label of shitty not as an admission of failure at the hands of extenuating circumstances, but instead as a proud rejection of normative notions of food quality. These users highlight their foods' lack of aesthetic appeal in order to raise up its non-visual qualities like taste and nutrition and to challenge the visual standards by which dominant food media defines food quality. In doing so, these users not only present their food media as more authentic and truer to life, but also as a deeper understanding of the true value of food.

## **Literature Review**

### *Food Media, Food Semiotics, & Food Porn*

In the contemporary digital landscape, food media stands as one of the most robust bodies of content across different online platforms (Lupton 2020), with no format being more indicative of this trend than that of “food porn.” First coined in 1979 by Center for Science in the Public Interest cofounder Michael Jacobson to refer to unhealthy foods, the term originally placed far more emphasis on the “porn” part of “food porn,” using the perceived connection between pornography and immorality to make synonymous unhealthy eating and the same sort of sensual immorality (McBride 2010, 38). As time progressed and mainstream cultural

conceptions of food, food media, and pornography changed, the meaning of food porn rapidly shifted in turn. The topical focus of the term shift from food to food media, first advertising with imagery explicitly evocative of sexual or sensual themes, but later any food media with gratuitous focus on food styling and aesthetics to the point that the meals depicted seem unattainable (McBride 2010, 38).

In turn with the popularization of the internet, an emerging ecosystem of similarly styled “\_\_\_ porn” communities began to grow, with facets ranging from organizational porn to real estate porn (Dejmanee 2016, 429). As communications and social media researcher Tisha Dejmanee frames it, these online communities “seek to disassociate from pornography’s explicit sexual associations while alluding to its production qualities and focus on vivid details to evoke strong reactions in the viewer” (2016, 429-430). Here the term “porn” is broken down to media that evokes an enjoyable sensory experience, predominately through its visuals. It's within this online context that food porn contemporaneously exists as food media with explicit focus on presenting rich visual details and luxurious aesthetics in accordance with desirable eating.

While the specific term “food porn” has only been applied to this body of media recently, there is reason to believe that this style of aesthetic food media predates even the first uses of the term food porn. Theorist Roland Barthes wrote a great deal about the protocol and communicative properties of food, particularly when that food is recontextualized through the lens of food media (1972). In his discussion of the hyper-performative and largely unattainable food preparations shown in working-class magazines compared to the more grounded and instructional food media of affluent middle-class magazines, Barthes argues that “Ornamental Cookery” is entirely divorced from foods original nutritional function and instead acts as fictive wish fulfillment; a satiation for the eyes rather than the stomach (1997). Contemporary theorist Jenny L. Herman takes this further, applying the ideas of Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Marie Floch

to argue that food porn and digital food photography function as a full simulacrum, recentring the purpose of food away from its ability to satiate and towards its ability to communicate protocol and status; turning every meal into a message and every bite a statement. (2017).

Among the emerging body of digital food culture scholarship, a field still very much in its infancy at ten years old (Lupton 2020), food porn has been a topic of great interest. Researchers have examined how food porn and similar food media affect eating behaviors, both as media producers and consumers (Andersen, Byrne, & Wang 2021; Herman 2017), how online influencers recreate and reinforce preexisting cultural perceptions of “correct” eating through the production of food porn (Goodman & Jaworska 2020), and especially how food porn and similar digital food media both reinforces and defies preexisting cultural associations between food, gender, and sex (Lupton 2019; Lupton 2020; McBride 2010; Dejmanee 2016). The degree to which traditional food porn is studied by scholarship of digital food culture makes the paucity of research on the phenomenon’s foil, colloquially known as “shitty food porn,” all the more engaging.

Unlike traditional food porn and its focus on highlighting beauty, ephemerality, and aesthetics in food, sometimes to the expense of its own sensory enjoyment or even edibility (Andersen, Byrne, & Wang 2021, 7), shitty food porn highlights food in its ugly, incorrect, and otherwise “shitty” permutations. Its media showing slop-like stews, pale undercooked meats, greasy sauces, and violently clashing food fusions. What's important is that the food is generally seen as defective or “shitty” in its appearance and that the poster knows and intends for it to be perceived as such.

Following from Jack Goody’s observation that the earliest cookbooks recorded recipes from the kitchens of high nobility and that cookbooks and their derivative food media enshrine and reify the cooking of the upper classes as “correct” cooking (1982, 103), cooking media has

in some sense always existed to highlight and reinforce “good” and “correct” ways of cooking and eating. This has been observed of traditional digital food media such as food porn (Goodman & Jaworska 2020), but shitty food porn is unique as it seems to run counter to this ideal in its very conception.

Almost always posted under the guise of humor, shitty food porn exists in some form across many of the same online platforms where traditional food porn has been allowed to flourish, but it is unique in its presence as an almost entirely online phenomenon. As discussed above, even traditional food porn predates digital media, and while media that features “ugly” or otherwise “bad” foods has likely existed for as long as cultural distinctions between good and bad food, there has never been a flourishing body of media that exclusively highlights this sort of food within analog media. No shelves of cookbooks showing how to make terrible tasting foods; no seasons of cooking shows spotlighting intentionally ugly meals. Even popular shows that have emerged in the wake of shitty food porn such as “Worst Cooks in America” (2010) or “Kitchen Nightmares” (2007) use ugly food as a signifier of the chef or restaurants wider defects; merely a starting point off which the shows move on to their road to improvement and eventual “correct” cooking. Shitty food porn stands alone not only in its spotlighting of ugly food, but in its celebration of it.

### *Humor, Disgust, & Online Comic Disposition*

Beyond its focus on unpleasant and ugly foods, shitty food porn is further distinguished from traditional food porn and food media more generally by its nearly universal comical tone. While traditional food porn generally ranges in tone from instructional to aspirational, shitty food porn is almost always framed as a joke, with the uploader and intended audience appreciating it as the subject of comic critique.

In one sense, this can be understood as part of the long-running tradition of disgust based or gross-out humor. In its variable permutations, shitty food porn embodies all three stages of the Parasite Avoidance Theory of disgust: microbe disgust prompted by threats to health and wellbeing (seen in raw, rotten, burnt, or otherwise inedible preparations of food), manners disgust prompted by violations of social norms (seen in unsightly, unaesthetic, or generally ugly foods), and moral disgust prompted by violations of specific cultural traditions (seen most often in overpriced and underwhelming restaurant orders or foods that violate cultural conceptions of proper flavor pairings) (Jajszczok 2022, 30-31). More important to its comedic presentation is shitty food porn's interpretation through Benign Violation Theory, wherein disgust is transposed into humor if the norm violation in question is evaluated as benign (at least to the viewer) (Jajszczok 2022, 31-32). Through this lens, all three levels of Parasite Avoidance Theory disgust can translate into humor, aided by hunger's ability to mitigate social norms around disgust (Jajszczok 2022, 32). Moreover, as humor is more easily elicited from disgust triggers when viewed from the perspective of a spectator as opposed to a protagonist (Hemenover & Schimmack 2007, 1104), the separation of the viewer from the source of disgust by the inherently voyeuristic nature of food media further eases the communication of comedy.

The humorous tone of shitty food porn must also be understood through its unique online context and the wider comic disposition of the internet. Comedy and humor have become central lenses through which online content is viewed, particularly new media unique to digital platforms, in part due to the lowering of commercial and publishing barriers the internet has provided, and in part as a social adaptation against the consequences of not recognizing deadpan humor or "getting the joke" (Holm 2021). This assumption of comedic intent is doubly important for communities built around content like shitty food porn where the primary focus is voyeurism and derision of content that would otherwise defy typical social norms of conduct. As has been

observed of online “roasting” communities, built around the submitting of self-portraits for public criticism, comic disposition serves both to enable deriding comments that would otherwise be stigmatized but also to mediate conversation and ensure criticisms aimed towards mutual humor as opposed to genuine hostile intent (Allison, Bussey, & Sweller 2019). Critical here is the idea that both posters and commenters are “in on the joke,” with people uploading images of themselves with the full expectation and intent that they will receive criticism, mitigated by the mutual goal that said criticism be aimed towards communal humor. Under such context, the comedic tone of shitty food porn should not be considered a mere quirk of its existence, but a central tenet in its identity, part and parcel to its foundation as media rooted in various forms of disgust, online discourse, and communities of comedic derision.

### *Digital Authenticity & Authentic Eating Online*

Early understandings of digital authenticity tend to understand the idea through the lens of digital dualism, where people have physical “real” selves and digital “fake” personas, the former always being more authentic than the tightly curated latter (Reade 2021, 3; Jurgenson 2011). However, more contemporary literature tends to understand the idea in terms closer to what social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson calls “Augmented Reality,” where online presentation of self is not strictly siloed off from physical presentation but rather both function as a continuous and multifaceted performance of self, with digital technologies merely augmenting how and to whom that performance is staged (Jurgenson 2011). Paired with Erving Goffman’s Dramaturgical theory, authenticity can be seen not as an innate quality of physical interaction that is devoid from digital interaction, but instead as a constant performance of self-presentation that must be actively maintained and negotiated in both physical and digital space (Abidin 2018).

The primary distinction that arises between physical and digital performances of authenticity is the presence and influence of non-human actors. In a social media environment,



aside from the performer and their intended audience is the platform itself, the algorithms that manage content therewithin, and any number of features and settings that all shape the affordances of users and their resultant presentations of self (Duguay 2017). In particular, the user engagement economies of most contemporary social media platforms heavily incentivize extremely positive presentations of self; highlight reels of health, wealth, and good vibes that draw users' attention and translates it into advertising revenue (Berryman & Kavka 2018, 86). Beyond creating a distorted vision of reality through the lens of exclusively positive and advertiser friendly posting behaviors, these non-human actors, including the platforms themselves, exert major pressure on their users, with producers often citing the constant stress of maintaining their positive affect online (Berryman & Kavka 2018, 87) and viewers expressing dissatisfaction with social media portrayals of life so positive and professionally managed that they cease to be relatable or engaging (Reade 2021, 10). It's within this context that communities of authenticity arise on the social internet.

Online communities of authenticity, often known as “raw” or “unfiltered” communities, specifically aim to present and valorize the authentic, benign, and unglamorous elements of life often curtailed from social media feeds. For fitness bloggers that might involve showing stretch marks, recovery periods, and unedited photos of the body (Reade 2021), for vloggers that might include tearful videos discussing mental health and financial struggle (Berryman & Kavka 2018), but common to all is an active effort to represent oneself in an authentic manor atypical of the social media space they descend from. On an affective level, these communities often become sites of catharsis and connectivity for their participant users. Rather than enacting positive affect through aspirational or glamorous depictions of self, these communities act as outlets for negative emotions; places for users to seek catharsis and commiseration over similar

circumstances and share the burden of misery through the medium of digital communication (Berryman & Kavka 2018, 91).

Moreover, in their own way these communities do political work as counter-cultural spaces. In particular, online fitness and beauty communities focused on “raw” presentation do so less as means to express negative emotions and seek mutual sympathy and more as means to challenge dominant social norms around what fit or beautiful actually means and looks like (Reade 2021, 9). Common to these variations of communities of authenticity is an awareness and frustration with the ways social media allowances shape depictions of the self, as well as a sense of community and connectedness built through the understanding of similar life circumstances.

However, a common issue faced by communities of authenticity emerges when the performance of authenticity stops being a convenience and starts becoming a requirement as demanding as the performance of positivity it superseded. Authenticity always exists within the context of the inauthentic and the social definitions and signifiers of either are always in flux, with embodiment of authenticity often being as or even more performative than that of inauthenticity (Marwick, Boyd 2011, 124). This manifests in what social media researcher Crystal Abidin refers to as calibrated amateurism, where authenticity becomes a cultivated aesthetic designed to signal the user’s relatability and realness (2017). As they phrase it, “it is not enough for them to merely show themselves without “artifice”: barefaced, with a bedhead, and in pajamas. Instead, they must actively juxtapose this stripped-down version of themselves against the median and normative self-presentations of glamor, to continually create and assign value to new markers — faults and flaws, failures and fiascos — to affirm the veracity of their truth-ness” (Abidin 2018). Under this lens, authenticity is largely subsumed into the dominant aesthetic of any given online culture, with “raw” depictions of self being means for users to distinguish

themselves from the crowd until a pastiche of authenticity becomes the norm; putting great effort into looking natural.

Calibrated amateurism also presents a major issue for the political power of communities of authenticity to act as counter-cultural spaces. As the performance of authenticity becomes less about being natural or unedited and more about being conspicuously “real,” the popular image of authenticity starts to tighten and exclude visions of “raw” that don’t adequately fit the mold. While raw fitness communities valorize authenticity and showing the body as it truly is, the presentational standards of authenticity result in a media landscape that still ultimately points to white, able, heteronormative bodies as the peak (Reade 2021, 9). At the end of the day, the digital intimacies facilitated by communities of authenticity function the same as the supposedly inauthentic communities they position themselves against, driving engagement towards a performative standard of good living and translating that engagement into advertising revenue for the platform holders (Reade 2021, 16).

While food authenticity is a much discussed and litigated topic both on and offline, there is very little academic writing about how food porn or shitty food porn negotiate performances of authenticity within their digital environments. As discussed, traditional food porn’s ever-increasing demand for visual standards and hyper-positive depictions of food create a media space largely inaccessible to all but the most professional. This in many ways mirrors the fitness and beauty social media communities that their respective raw counterparts emerged from, with communities of authenticity formed in part as a response to the dominant aesthetic standards of the space reaching beyond what was realistic or relatable to their users. From this perspective, shitty food porn can be seen as a community of authenticity, aiming to create an alternative online food ecosystem that places a premium not on visual fidelity and presentational excellence but instead on the banal shittiness and spectacular failure of food gone awry.

### *Humor and Shitty Food Porn as Mild Protest*

Given shitty food porn's relation to comedic disgust and derision, argument could be made that shitty food porn acts as a sort of counterfactual to traditional food porn, reinforcing the same conceptions of correct food from the other end; showing correct eating through the silhouette of incorrect eating. However, if this were the sole explanation for the existence and propagation of shitty food porn, one would not only expect cultural conceptions of "good" and "bad" food to be shared between traditional and shitty food porn communities, but also for shitty food porn communities to be entirely built around disgust and ridicule; humor entirely at the expense of those that transgress culinary norms. cursory examination of shitty food porn communities tends to show that neither of these are the case.

While there is definite overlap in the construction of "good" and "bad" food between traditional and shitty food porn communities, their views are not exactly matched, and food initially posted as food porn can often find itself reposted on shitty food porn communities in mocking fashion. Moreover, the comments on any given post are bound to be littered with statements along the lines of "That looks terrible, but it probably tastes great" or "I would still eat it." Disgust is present, even omnipresent, in the conversation, but almost always cut with appreciation of the food's non-aesthetic qualities.

Given these observations, there's room to consider shitty food porn not merely as humor rooted in disgust for violations of culinary norms, but humor aimed at counter-cultural revolt against the traditional cultural prescriptions of food porn and food media more generally. Comedy has long been a tool to criticize dominant modes of thinking, particularly by marginalized communities, and this has been amplified and accelerated by the proliferation of the internet with communities ranging from African Americans (Outley, Bowen, & Pinckney,

2021) to sex workers (Easterbrook-Smith, 2021) using barbed internet humor to reinforce community solidarity and challenge dominant social norms.

This production and consumption of media that simultaneously interfaces with and criticizes societal norms draws parallels to Janice Radway's idea of "mild protest." In her examination of romance literature, Radway posits that while the stories often depict patriarchal and heteronormative gender relations, they "can be conceived as an activity of mild protest and longing for reform necessitated by those institutions' failure to satisfy the emotional needs of women" (1984, 213). By the act of consuming these novels, the reader simultaneously acknowledges the cultural norms of romance and the weaknesses therein, interfacing with dominant cultural narratives through media as an expression of their dissatisfaction living said narratives, forming a "minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest" (Radway 1984, 222).

This notion of the mild protest has also been applied to traditional food porn, framing it as a sort of post-feminist "failed liberation." Tisha Dejmanee argues that while food porn was able to recenter female authorship in food media and shift its central narratives from denial and restriction to the unabashed pursuit of guilt free pleasure, it is ultimately incapable of escaping the innate voyeurism of the medium and its built-in associations between food and women as consumptive objects (Dejmanee 2016). As with the original romance literature example, critical interfacing with dominant cultural narratives is still functioning within those narratives, and the extent of mild protests effectiveness is limited by the weaknesses that can be viewed from within the structure of the dominant culture.

Under such framing, shitty food porn might be understood as an escalation of this mild protest. The same feminist and postfeminist lens used by Radway and Dejmanee, however, proves difficult to apply to shitty food porn as outside of very occasional paratextual context clues, little information indicating the gender of the original poster or commenters is given in

shitty food porn discourse. That said, both gendered and class-based discussion of food and wider food politics are present in shitty food porn posts and comments, and their examination under a mild protest lens is very salient given traditional food porn's reinforcement of upper-class conceptions of correct cooking/eating (Goodman & Jaworska 2020), and shitty food porn's frequent depictions of "poverty food." In its rejection of traditional food aesthetics and valorization of the nonvisual pleasures of food, shitty food porn is framed as a sort of digital food media counterculture where the authentically bad is better than the synthetically beautiful.

This research seeks to understand how shitty food porn is communally constructed by the online spaces dedicated to it and how that definition differs both in semiotic meaning and implication from that of traditional food porn. While there is a narrow field of "correct" ways to cook and a near-infinite number of "incorrect" ways to cook, shitty food porn does not highlight all types of "incorrect" cooking and does not evaluate those that it does equally. Despite its comedic overtones, shitty food porn does come to represent something of an online culinary counterculture, using comedic interfacing with traditional tenets of food presentation and aesthetics along with genuine appreciation of foods non-aesthetic and non-visual qualities to criticize and push back against dominant narratives of "correct" cooking and eating. However, like the mild protests that predate it, this cultural resistance is necessarily tempered by the dominant narratives it functions within, resulting in shitty food porn that is at once critical of traditional culinary culture, while requiring an understanding of and interfacing with said culture to predicate its humor off of.

## **Methodology**

Recent scholarship on online food media has shown digital ethnography as a uniquely suited methodology for understanding online foodscapes. Ethnography has a long tradition in the study of food and food media on account of its ability to highlight food and eating within the wider assemblage of social, political, and economic networks that inform them (Schneider & Eli 2021, 74). This is of particular importance in the study of digital food culture given online ethnography's ability to illuminate the permeable online/offline divide and how media communication on the internet harbors significant implications for our lives offline (Schneider & Eli 2021, 80-81). Indeed, among the pre-existing literature on traditional food porn, online ethnographic observation is a common methodological approach with a proven track record (Dejmanee 2016; Andersen, Byrne, & Wang 2021; Lupton 2019; Lupton 2020; Goodman & Jaworska 2020). Within these studies, researchers immersed themselves in the content and communities of online food culture, and through their participation with users and observation of practices better understood the dynamics of online foodscapes. As was the case with these studies, a digital ethnographic approach to shitty food porn not only allows for the observation of the media itself, but its place within a larger online ecosystem and granular observation of user's reactions through likes and comments.

As discussed by Michael Goodman and Sylvia Jaworska in their examination of the UKs digital foodscape, online influencers often act as the tastemakers in online food discourse, particularly on user centric platforms like Twitter/X, Instagram, and personal blogs, where users' activities are "rolling performances of identities, brands, personalities and, of course, value generation" (2020, 184). For a smaller community like that of shitty food porn and pertaining to a research question of construction of taste, there is a risk the presence of such influencers could tilt the scales away from a community construction of shitty food porn and towards what a handful of thought leaders dislike in their food.

To minimize this risk, using a community centered platform like Reddit makes the most sense. Unlike a platform like Instagram or Twitter/X where the base unit of interaction is a user profile or a decentralized hashtag, the base unit of interaction on Reddit is a subreddit; a topical community page not dissimilar to a dedicated web form. Reddit's resident shitty food porn community, r/shittyfoodporn, has at time of writing 2.4 million subscribers and an 11-year history, making it not only one of the largest shitty food porn communities online but among the larger subreddits on the platform. Between the wealth of posts submitted to the subreddit on a daily basis and their associated social interactions in the form of upvotes/downvotes and comment threads, the community provides ample opportunity not only to see what shitty food porn typically consists of, but how it functions as the bedrock of wider community social dynamics. Moreover, as will be discussed in greater depth later on, the implicit and explicit subreddit rules governing posting and commenting behaviors, as well as wider community discourse around these regulations serve to highlight the community's ongoing boundary making in a way few other social media platforms could afford.

Observations took place between the months of January and May of 2024, with near daily recording of posting behaviors, commentor interactions, the shifting popularity of different types of shitty food porn, and the evolving governing structure of the subreddit itself. After observing the degree to which the community criticized posts and users, they deemed to be inauthentic or “fake” in their engagement with shitty food porn, the decision was made to avoid participation through posting or commenting lest interacting with the subreddit in a research capacity create tension with the community that might endanger relations with users or foreclose future observation opportunities.

Approval from the University of Chicago's IRB committee was obtained prior to beginning the research process.



## **Analysis & Discussion**

Months of observation of the r/shittyfoodporn subreddit paints shitty food porn (at least as it unique exists on Reddit) as a community of culinary authenticity; one made unique not only by its focus on food, but through its use of humor to mediate authentic depictions of self otherwise prohibited elsewhere online. Where other online communities of authenticity tend to structure themselves around valorization, elevating depictions of authenticity by celebrating their “real” and “raw” qualities, shitty food porn draws interest and cultivates community around the innate humor of food gone awry. Humor is the commanding variable in shitty food porn, not only carving out a space for shitty food in a digital culinary ecosystem that is otherwise overtly hostile to it, but also shaping the types of authentic cooking deemed permissible within the community, how those authentic representations of self are used, and ultimately how shitty food porn positions itself relative to traditional food porn and food media more generally. Moreover, shitty food porn illustrates how humor-mediated online communities of authenticity are able to avoid the pitfalls of calibrated amateurism, while also highlighting the unique limitations of humor as means to challenge perceived inauthenticity.

While not obviously intentional, the subreddit’s users clearly understand the community as a unique platform for culinary authenticity and are quick to defend it against perceived shifts into inauthenticity. The humor of failed food is the bedrock of the community, but users are active in their efforts to ensure this comedic atmosphere is used to enable digital authenticity rather than as a platform from which to attack “incorrect” ways of cooking and eating. The ways in which they use the space indicate a sophisticated understanding of food politics beyond what is typically seen in other online food communities. Users wield humor to facilitate discussion of limiting life circumstances, appeal for commiseration and support over culinary failures, and advocate for an understanding of food quality that transcends the strictly visual criteria that

dominates much of traditional food media. While it's comedic basis places unique limitations on how the community shapes and uses its depiction of authentic eating, shitty food porn highlights the unique potential of humor as a mediating agent for authentic depictions of self within the comic disposition of the wider internet.

### *Technical Context*

On a purely technical level, it is not difficult to see how shitty food porn has come to exist and why it has only been able to do so through digital media. The disruptive power of the modern social internet is in many ways a confluence of different societal and technological shifts, from the wide availability of relatively low cost and high-quality cell phone cameras to the proliferation of an engagement based online advertisement economy that when taken in totality effectively reduced the cost of amateur media production and publication to zero. As sociologist Deborah Lupton frames it, the affordances of social media allow for an unprecedented memetic spread of media of all sorts, being reposted, remixed, and recontextualized at every stage of the process and particularly allowing for visual media like photos, videos, GIFs, and memes to not only stand as independent media artifacts but moments of participation in a wider social network (2019, 154). All of these mechanisms contributed to traditional food porn's rise from niche food advertising presentation to the titan of digital food culture that it is today, but they are just as if not more instrumental in shitty food porn's rise to prominence.

Analog food media is typically reflective of classical upper-class notions of "correct" dining, going all the way back to the first cookbooks, in part because the wealthy could most easily access and navigate the systems of media production and publication (Goody 1982, 103) and in part because the high cost of analog media publication disincentivizes catering to niche markets like people interested in purposefully bad food. The internet fundamentally changed this

dynamic, not only by drastically reducing the cost of media production/publication and democratizing access to media publication platforms, but by facilitating widespread dissemination of media that allows audience communities to form in ways otherwise previously impossible. While a locally published cookbook or even a widely syndicated cooking show need to keep their content broadly appealing in order to capture a sustainable audience, the low cost of amateur digital media and the memetic nature of its spread means communities can form and sustain themselves across wide geographic areas even if their subject is relatively niche. Thus, shitty food porn can exist and thrive in the online era where before its reach would have been too small and its economic returns too marginal to sustain its existence.

What is missing from this technical explanation of shitty food porn is a reason why; why users choose to take and share photos of meals they understand to be shitty; why users actively seek out and celebrate these otherwise maligned food presentations; and why the community has shaped the definition of shitty food porn to include some bad food and exclude others. For those answers, one must look past the purely technical explanations and towards social ones.

### *Humor*

It only takes a few minutes of browsing r/shittyfoodporn for the most overt explanation for shitty food porn's appeal to become obvious; it's funny. The general mood within the community is not anger or righteous indignation or even overt disgust but instead lighthearted humor. Moreover, the joke isn't aimed in a single direction, with spectators exclusively laughing at the food and its poster for its poor quality. Rather, the atmosphere is much more akin to a communal roast. Posters will join in the conversation in the comments, setting up and building off of the jokes of other users towards the mutual aim of having as much fun with the post as possible. Comments can often be barbed, even outright hostile, but on average those that use the

post as a springboard for their own jokes and good-natured ribbing of the poster's misfortune are both more numerous and more popular. It is fairly typical for the top comment on a shitty food post to be a zinger building on the innate joke of the meal, sometimes even teed up by the original poster in their title or post text. While the poster and their meal are the butt of the joke, the atmosphere always seems aimed at ensuring everyone is having fun.

Explaining the exact minutiae of where the humor stems from, why the joke is funny, is difficult given its variance post to post and very probably user to user, but on a baseline level it functions as a sort of gross out humor. The benign violation of culinary standards through clashing flavors, poorly assembled meals, and plain ugly food is rendered comedic through the context of the community, the distance the media creates between the viewer and violation, and the harmlessness of the violation in question, transposing disgust into comedy. Viewed through the lens of Parasite Avoidance Theory, this may partially explain the trends in "shittiness" between posts. While burnt, rotten, raw, or otherwise totally inedible meals that would generally trigger microbial disgust are not unheard of on the subreddit, they are vastly outnumbered by posts evoking manners or moral disgust; food that is "wrong", but ultimately wrong in a way that is benign and laughable as opposed to visceral and nauseating. To an extent, the oppositional framing of shitty food porn helps play into this. By deliberately invoking traditional food porn and its heightened presentation of food, the gulf in quality between it and the amateur productions of shitty food porn is all the more apparent and comedic.

It is also important to acknowledge the non-trivial way in which schadenfreude contributes to this humorous dynamic. The element of misfortune in knowing the food pictured in shitty food porn is someone's meal, something they tried to cook and in all likelihood will have to eat, does inform the base level gross out humor of shitty food porn. A similar but inverse dynamic can also exist for the shitty food porn posters, with them deriving comedy from the

disgusted and uncomfortable reactions of the community. For the publishing participants in the community, it's not unlike sharing a meme, bringing a bite sized piece of humor to the table that everyone can laugh and riff on equally, made distinct not only through its culinary focus but its narrow comedic focus on the gross out and the humor of communal reactions.

Resulting from all of this is a subtle shift in what “shitty” actually means within the shitty food porn community. On posts depicting food that is bad in a banal or uninteresting way, or even food that looks good but not quite to the visual standards of traditional food porn, it is common to see comments along the lines of “Wrong subreddit” or “This isn’t shitty.” Comments like these are some of the most common and explicit boundary policing seen in the community, but their appeal is not a straightforward demand for uglier food. As discussed, the community favors food that is shitty in a manners or moral disgust sense rather than that of microbial disgust, where the actual revulsion of the food in question overpowers any comedy that can be derived from it. The community is not seeking to inflate the general level of disgust in the community through these comments, but rather to keep the median post quality in a sweet spot of ugly that is maximally comedic. The result is a common understanding of “shitty” that changes from meaning merely bad or disgusting to meaning bad in a way that is comedic. Accusations that a post “isn't shitty enough” are not even saying the food isn’t bad, they are saying that it isn’t funny and therefore does not belong on the subreddit.

With this understanding, one might expect the subreddit to quickly descend into intentionally manufactured shitty food porn. If food that is spectacularly bad to the point of comedy can be easily translated into social capital, why wait for an incidental screw up in the kitchen to create a meal that fits the profile when you could intentionally throw together an unappealing slop purpose built to be disgusting? Were it the case, shitty food porn would in many ways be mirroring the development of traditional food porn, with an aesthetic presentation

coming to dominate the scene resulting in users making meals to match the aesthetic first and foremost; manufacturing beauty (or in this case shittiness) at the expense of all else because the meal exists as media subject first and food second. Shitty food porn and traditional food porn would become equal sides of the same dynamic; two manufactured culinary simulacrums, one designed for praise and the other for ridicule, but ultimately reinforcing of the same vision of what correct and incorrect eating looks like. However, even a cursory examination of the subreddit will show that this is not the case.

Forgeries are not unheard of. Posts that were clearly cobbled together to be intentionally ugly, reposts from other social media platforms, and even a handful of AI generated shitty food images can all be seen, especially during the earliest phases of observation, but these posts are overwhelmingly met with suspicion and negative reactions. More so than comments claiming a post “isn’t shitty” are comments accusing a post of being fake, that the poster is “Karma farming” or trying to get “internet points.” One particular post had a user reposting an image of a Vienna sausage, pickle, and aspic pie, itself originally made by social media influencer Kyle Marcoux, known more widely as “The Vulgar Chef.” Commenters tore into the user, not only criticizing them for reposting another person's photo, but for showing food that was made to be intentionally ugly. When the original poster responded that the subreddit was for posting ugly food and that they had posted ugly food, they were met with a wall of criticism and a general sentiment that “That isn't what this sub[reddit] is about.”

This preoccupation with authenticity was perhaps most cemented in late February 2024, when the subreddit’s leadership underwent something of a soft coup. For a community of 2.4 million, r/shittyfoodporn has always had moderation somewhere between lax and non-existent. Unlike other similar sized subreddits there were no formal community rules and just a vague suggestion in the sidebar that the community was for photos of shitty food and shitty photos of

food. It was common knowledge in the community that most of the moderators were inactive and would not respond to reports. This changed when seemingly overnight the subreddits moderating team was cleared out, leaving only one of the original moderators and a handful of new recruits. In a pinned post titled “Hey there! New mod here, checking in!” the new team announced their intent to reorganize the subreddit and establish a set of formal rules, asking the community what rules they wanted to see instituted and what they would consider a reportable offense.

While there was mention of placing tighter controls and stricter definitions on the minimum threshold of shittiness for posts, the resultant discussion overwhelmingly focused on the idea that “fake” shitty food porn should not be allowed in the community. Users rallied against “ragebait,” AI generated images, shitposts, incomplete or unfinished meals, and “stupid food,” all with the root argument that such posts represented intentionally shitty food that was against the spirit of the community due to its inauthenticity. Most often this was expressed in terms of “karma farming,” with users accusing others of posting inauthentically in order to gain large numbers of upvotes from other users, with the implication that such behavior was not only frowned upon but an incorrect use of the subreddit.

Resulting from this and other community discussions was a series of new rules, most notable a “Not Shitty Food Porn” rule clarifying that incredible food, average food, inedible meals, memes/shitposts, AI images, or any post past a certain downvote threshold would all be removed, a “Original Content or Restaurant Content Only” rule forbidding posts that are not users “own content,” and a “No Intentionally Shitty Food” rule. The full text of this last one reads “Throwing a bunch of shit on a plate, snapping a shitty pic, and posting with a shitty caption won't fly here - this isn't a karma farm.” In aggregate, these discourses and the way they fundamentally shaped the subreddit illustrate that shitty food porn is not solely dedicated to a specific type of humor, but rather a community of digital authenticity predicated on comedy.

## *Authenticity*

Understood through this pursuit for authenticity, the appeal and sustained presence of shitty food porn within the digital food ecosystem becomes much more clear. Like its parallel communities of authenticity formed in the wake of mainstream digital beauty or fitness culture, shitty food porn exists as a sort of response to the aesthetics of traditional food porn and the perceived fakeness and unattainability of the life it envisions. Exhausted by the effort and performativity involved, or literally unable to meet the minimum visual standards set by many traditional food porn communities, users who still want to engage with the social activity of posting food images online and being part of a wider digital culinary community turn to communities like r/shittyfoodporn with the understanding that the average meal tends to look a lot more shitty than most online food media makes it out to be. They are highlighting the 3-day-old leftovers, hastily assembled sandwiches, and midnight cravings of the world, posted not because they are a picturesque example of culinary excellence, but because the act of posting ties the user into a social community and allows them to show themselves authentically.

The preoccupation with “fake” shitty food porn and rallying against intentional bad food, even if the results are humorous, comes from a deeper critique of inauthenticity. To many in the community, making a meal to be turned into exceptionally beautiful food porn or exceptionally ugly shitty food porn are indistinguishable as both are making food not for consumption but for media production; feeding the camera first as it were. It’s not posting with the aim of presenting a more authentic self, one that could not be allowed elsewhere, but instead amassing popularity by following the normative aesthetic trend. While it may look the same, it is so virulently rejected because it is opposed to the spirit of the community.



In writing about YouTube vlogging communities, internet studies and media researchers Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka posited the idea that self-exposure of negative emotions its depiction of authenticity represents “both the disease and the cure offered by social media;” that the urge to present authentically can only exist in a mediated cultural environment that pressures users to present inauthentically and that both are ultimately products of the way social media makes the private life public (2018, 96). It is an idea that can be applied widely to digital communities of authenticity but is particularly pertinent for shitty food porn, whose existence is deeply and irrevocably tied to that of traditional food porn, down to its name. While cultural standards of “good” or “beautiful” food exist outside of the context of food media, shitty food porn’s unique deployment of those standards can only exist within the shadow of traditional food porn. For starters, the joke at the core of shitty food porn doesn't land as well without the context of traditional food porn; no expectations to subvert and conventions to defy. More importantly, the desire to present authentically and what authenticity even looks like in the context of food social media can only exist in the wake of traditional food porn and the perception that it is both an inauthentic representation of typical food and that said inauthentic standard restricts what sort of posts are tolerated or even aloud within mainstream cooking circles.

Prior to the subreddit coup, this last point was literalized through a type of post so common as to become something of a cliché. Typically, they depicted food that was a far cry from the general community threshold of shittiness and as such would normally be swarmed with criticism that it “isn't shitty enough” or that they had “posted to the wrong sub” barring the inclusion of the detail that they had been driven off of the normal food porn subreddit. Sometimes this manifested as a literal removal of posts by the r/foodporn mod team or a social ostracization by commenters telling them their food wasn't up to par. Often users expressed that they were intimidated by the typical quality of r/foodporn posts and simply felt what they had to

offer wouldn't be accepted even if they did post it. As a result of this, many users tended to reverse course, extolling the food's quality and sharing their own stories about how smug, pretentious, and unfair the users and mods of r/foodporn were. Some users typically persisted in their criticism, but in general the tone on these posts was exceedingly positive. While the food was not exceedingly shitty, and the comedy was consequently lacking, users tended to embrace and support these posts off of the back of their authenticity. They were rejected by traditional food porn and that made them shitty food porn enough.

Within this context, shitty food porn seems to fit squarely alongside other online communities of authenticity. However, there is a key difference in how that authenticity is mediated within the community. For the online fitness and beauty communities, for which much of the current literature on the topic is dedicated, performance of authenticity is not only motivated by content producer's desire to break away from the restrictive style of presentation in the dominant scene, but by a sort of valorization placed on the idea of authenticity. Enacting authenticity becomes "being raw" and posting users draw attention to the "imperfections" they have left in the photos or their refusal to edit them to make them more traditionally attractive (Reade 2021, 7-8). Moreover, spectating users comment on how their viewing decisions are colored by authenticity, choosing to follow users because of their realistic and authentic seeming presentation and choosing to leave others because of their overly manicured professional presentations (Reade 2021, 10). Authenticity becomes a shorthand for quality and user's posts become exceptional on the basis that they are "real."

This valorization of authenticity allows for lively digital communities to grow in support of alternative presentations of self, but it all too often ends up recreating the same sort of performative simulacrum of life that it was itself built against. When being "real" or "raw" is shorthand for quality, its presence or absence commands real social and economic capital and as

such enacting authenticity becomes less a matter showing oneself as they are and more a matter of conspicuously signaling authenticity. Candid performance is replaced with a sort of calibrated amateurism, with users cultivating an aesthetic of authenticity that is less about the realities of their own life and more about juxtaposing themselves against the norm (Abidin 2018). The aesthetic signifiers of authenticity are little by little subsumed into the mainstream presentation of self until the effort and artifice of perpetually presenting a glamorous and positive version of oneself is overtaken by the effort of presenting a raw, #unfiltered version of oneself. The old pressures remain, often ensuring presentations of authenticity do not deviate too strongly from the normative core of beauty standards (Reade 2021, 9). The conditions have just shifted to demand users' presentation is positive, glamorous, and authentic.

Shitty food porn is not immune to this type of valorization enabled authenticity. The aforementioned example of users posting in r/shittyfoodporn after being driven out of or intimidated away from r/foodporn might be the best example of this, with the community valorizing user's authenticity and willingness to post photos of food outside the aesthetic norm. However, for the most part shitty food porn's depictions of authenticity and the community that has grown around them are not mediated by valorization but instead by humor. The joke at the core of shitty food porn, the baseline comedy of failed food, provides pretense for posting the ugly and unphotogenic food that is otherwise discouraged or forbidden in other food communities. In the same way valorization grants authentic representations of self a stage in other online communities, humor grants users a stage for authentic representations of their cooking, particularly when that cooking is authentically bad.

It is a mode of community organization that gels well with the wider comic disposition of the internet and the affective power of memes within social media. As sociologist Deborah Lupton has established in her own studies of digital food media, social media and the internet

more broadly have allowed visual media and memes of food to not only gain popularity but act as means to “create meaning, share affects, perform identities and participate in social networks” (2019, 154). The memetic spread of those meaning making images can be propelled by the internet's proclivity for comedy, particularly in the limited context of social media environments that invites viewers to see ironic deadpan in topics even initially conceived as serious (Holm 2021). Shitty food porn seems to have captured humor’s way of carving its own space online and harnessed it towards creating an area for authentic representation of food, and by extension self.

The community policing of food that isn't “shitty” enough (i.e. not funny enough) as well as shitty food that isn't “real” (i.e. not authentic enough) exemplifies at least an unconscious understanding of this dynamic. The post has to be funny because the humor is what facilitates its existence. If the food is bad but not funny, not noteworthy or interesting, then it draws no audience and fails as a means to communicate and form community with others. Inversely, if the food isn't “real” and its poor quality is not a reflection of genuine circumstances then the user is criticized on the basis of misusing the platform; that they are using the comedy of shitty food not as means of self-expression but as means to extract social capital. Prime shitty food porn, the posts most celebrated by the community, in terms of raw engagement metrics and commenter interactions, are those that strike the balance between the two. A humorous culinary failure and an authentic depiction of self; the humor drawing in audiences and interest and the authenticity adding a biting edge to the comedy and meaning to the post.

In its own way, this humor-mediated digital authenticity is able to persist where other communities built around valorization-mediated authenticity stumble. This is chiefly visible in how communities like shitty food porn resist having their aesthetic of authenticity subsumed into the mainstream visuals of traditional foodporn. As discussed, the preexisting literature on digital communities of authenticity notes a tendency to descend into calibrated amateurism, where an

effortful production of conspicuous authenticity overtakes candid capture of authentic living. This in part takes place because valorization-mediated authenticity functions on the same level as the mainstream communities it positions itself against, conflating the aesthetics of authentic food/fitness/beauty/etc. with quality in the same way their counterparts conflate wealth or positivity, or any number of normative standards with that same quality. Functioning on such a level, the aesthetics of authenticity can be quickly picked up and added to the mainstream, first as means to stand out and break away from the crowd, and later as a component of the new normative standard.

Humor-mediated authenticity like that seen in shitty food porn is uniquely resistant to this sort of cultural absorption because the aims of its presentation are fundamentally different. It's not aiming to depict good food, be that good by the standards of normative food media or good by a new redefined standard it is platforming. It is first and foremost trying to depict funny food. The joke works because the supposed shittiness of the food is placed in opposition to the visuals of traditional food porn. Were the aesthetics of shitty food porn to be co-opted and a calibrated amateurism to develop within traditional food porn to mimic the authenticity seen in shitty food porn, the joke would fall apart. Good food with the thumbprints of authenticity, the conspicuous signposts of performative realness, isn't funny because the root of the joke is that the food looks bad. At a minimum, it's uninteresting; left to languish like so many posts on r/foodporn and r/shittyfoodporn that users simply aren't interested in interacting with. At worst, it's seen as deceitful, the joke not only falling flat but the attempt to present authentically only inviting hostilities from users who deeply value that authenticity and reject its misappropriation.

All of this is not to say that humor-mediated authenticity is the silver bullet for online communities of authenticity. While it is resistant against being co-opted by the mainstream communities it builds itself in opposition to, shitty food porn illustrates that it shares a number of

issues with valorization-mediated authenticity, as well as a few novel issues of its own. For one, shitty food porn is deeply dependent on its foil of traditional food porn. Just as other online communities of authenticity are dependent upon the communities, they stem from to define their own identities, authenticity only existing in contrast to some other defined as inauthentic, the humor at the root of shitty food porn can only really exist against the silhouette of normative food standards like those tabled by traditional food porn. This is doubly so when considering shitty food porn's slant towards manors and moral disgust around food, rather than the innately revolting microbial disgust of rotten or inedible foods. Its humor is almost always predicated on the normative standards of food quality reinforced by traditional food porn, limiting its ability to truly challenge those norms. Were traditional food porn to vanish, the joke of shitty food porn falls apart, and with it the engagement and community that it offers to its users.

More specific to the humor-mediated form of shitty food porn is the demand that authenticity be comedic. Living authentically is often funny, especially when held in contrast to the tailored and edited lives often pictured through the social internet. The screw ups, bloopers, and mishaps of everyday life make for good comedy, but often authenticity is merely banal. The average meal rarely meets the heights of aesthetic presentation seen in traditional food porn, but it's not exceptionally common for them to be the spectacular failures of shitty food porn either. Shitty food porn enables authentic presentation of self through food but only when that presentation of self can sustain the joke. If it's not funny, it will be ignored or outright rejected. In a way, it becomes its own aesthetic of authenticity, this time not a calibrated amateurism aimed at being conspicuously authentic while also being positive and beautiful, but instead a performance calibrated towards maximizing the humor of the situation. For those users wishing to show themselves authentically when their cooking is average, shitty food porn has little to offer them.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the post-coup changes around the aforementioned posts by users intimidated off of the regular r/foodporn subreddit. While these posts had been received positively, they were definitely an exception; granted the honorary status of shitty food porn by virtue of their exile from traditional food porn as opposed to the humor of their food. Following the rise of the new moderation team, these posts were deemed to be too off topic and subsequently forbidden. The rules now direct users to post “incredible food” onto the regular r/foodporn subreddit and to post “normal food” onto r/decentfoodporn. A community almost as old as r/shittyfoodporn with 10 years of history, r/decentfoodporn represents a more traditional valorization-mediated community of culinary authenticity. While it is far from a small subreddit at ~18k members at time of writing, many of which joined after being sequestered from r/shittyfoodporn, its activity and general user interest is dwarfed by that of r/shittyfoodporn. Without humor to draw users in and mediate their presentations of authenticity, it has been unable to seriously take off. It's an indicator of the authentically average and the types of self-portrayal that fall through the cracks in a digital community of humor-mediated authenticity. Not spectacularly good or spectacularly bad and therefore not of interest.

This is related to the way the humor-mediated authenticity of shitty food porn is limited in its potential political action through its innately negative framing. Shitty food porn allows for authentic representations of food and self, but only when those representations are of a sufficiently comedic bad quality and when the user submitting them is willing to take on the label of “shitty.” It's an authenticity that is always lampshaded, always winking at the camera and acknowledging that the food depicted is somehow incorrect and that the joke is how wrong it is. To represent themselves authentically, users must acknowledge their experience is lesser, even in a cheeky lighthearted way. It's a framing that is at once central to the comedy of shitty food porn, making it exceptionally difficult to avoid, and deeply limiting to shitty food porn's

ability to openly challenge the norms and conventions of the traditional food porn communities it postures itself against.

Taken in aggregate, shitty food porn's position as an online community of authenticity is at once novel and deeply illustrative of the performative dynamics innate to authenticity on the social internet. Humor acts as both mediator and regulator, enabling performances of authenticity that would otherwise be condemned or forbidden in similar online culinary spaces while also demanding that said performances be humorous and acknowledge their position as lesser before entry. From this point, the question remains how users specifically employ the affordance of authenticity that humor provides them and what unique community dynamics follow suit. While the answer can never be universal, on r/shittyfoodporn, both before and after the moderator coup, the predominant answer to that question is seeking a sort of culinary commiseration.

### *Commiseration*

In late March 2024, an r/shittyfoodporn user uploaded a photo of a steak, gummy and discolored on the inside, slimy and undercooked on the outside, adorned with paper plate and plastic cutlery. It was fairly standard shitty food porn fare aside from its massive popularity, both in terms of upvotes and commenter reception, and the explicit context that the user couched the photo in. Between their title and post text, they explained their history in culinary school, their troubles with their daughter's extreme allergies and picky eating, and their general feelings of shame and loss at their inability to cook a pleasing meal. In the comments, users touched on the comedy of the sad steak, now tinged with the gallows humor of the original poster's context, but more than that, they offered support. Users shared their own stories of navigating the difficulties of an allergy prone child, shared recipes and cooking techniques that would fit their dietary restrictions, and generally offered words of support to help the original poster navigate the literal



challenges that caused the steak mishap as well as the emotional burden of feeling like they had failed as a chef.

This particular example is more explicit than most shitty food porn, with the original poster laying out the context and circumstances that dictated the meal as well as asking for support from the community, but it is illustrative of an undercurrent of commiseration that runs through almost all of r/shittyfoodporn. While most posts are not so forward with as many details as the aforementioned user, it is exceedingly common to at least hint at the circumstances that contributed to the meal's shitty outcome. Those circumstances might be as simple as lack of cooking experience or self-described laziness; they might be deeper societal circumstances like poverty or mental health struggles; or they might be as specific as a restrictive diet or a lack of time from a demanding job. Regardless, these circumstances, often described in the post title, text, or comments, couch the meal in the context of its creation. It's what went wrong; why the food turned out shitty.

In response to this context, the community typically offers support. This sometimes takes the form of literal support in the form of recipes or advice for how to navigate the particular circumstances bogging the user down, but more often it takes the form of social support; commiseration over a shared burden and assurance that the food (and the chef) can be good in spite of it looking bad. A sentiment so universal across shitty food porn posts as to be cliché is “that looks like shit, but it probably tastes great,” the default offering of support and assurance that looks aren't everything. Beyond this, users often share stories of struggles in similar circumstances, telling how they scraped by on pitiful sandwiches during their RN residency, or passing on some lessons from their own time as a penniless student with zero experience in the kitchen. Everyone partakes in the comedy of the post, but in return many are willing to offer

support and directly interface with the authenticity of the post; treating the meal not as a joke but as a reality of someone's life, itself reflective of much wider circumstances.

Between the steps of user posting and commenters offering commiseration is a seeming evaluation of the circumstances. While support is common, it's far from universal, and the degree to which the community chooses to offer commiseration or admonish the user for the quality of their food depends heavily on the preserved validity of the circumstances as determinants of the food's ultimate shittiness. In one particular case, a user uploaded a photo of their rice dinner having been turned an alarming shade of neon orange. The original poster explained in the comments that they hate eating carrots due to sensory issues associated with their autism but feel that they need to eat them to improve their nutrition, so they finely grated the carrots into the rice and tried to mask their appearance with food dye. While some users met the original poster with support, the general tenor of the comments section was far more hostile. Commenters asked "Are you four?" and wrote "This person is making their own food and can choose what to eat and instead tricks themselves like a child." The same sort of practical advice is given to the original poster about how they can navigate their issues and produce better meals, but this time delivered in a more chastising tone. They argue that the original poster should have known better, that they should have eaten the carrots raw or shredded them into a more flavorful meal, or simply bought a different type of vegetable if they disliked carrots. When the subject of a limited budget is brought up, one user responds by saying they should have bought canned vegetables and that they can be bought for less than a dollar at Walmart. Again, the sentiment is not universal and there were a number of commenters offering the same sort of support and commiseration to the original poster that has been described before, some even coming to their defense in the comments, but the negativity and conflicted perspective seen around this post is indicative of the wider social mechanisms at play in shitty food porn as a community.

In both the steak post and the dyed rice post, the original poster is in a way submitting two items to the community. On the one, they are submitting the photo of their food for appraisal on the merits of its shittiness; that the food is bad and that its failure is funny. On this front, both posts are accepted, receiving a large number of upvotes and comments about the comedy of their appearance. On the other, they are submitting the circumstances of the meal for appraisal on the merits of it justifying the meal's faults. The admission that the meal is bad, or at least looks bad, is baked into assumptions of it being posted to the subreddit but by placing the meal within the context of its construction, authentically presenting not only the quality of the food but the realities that dictate it, users are seeking commiseration over their shared circumstances and support for their culinary challenges.

Here, the two posts significantly differ. While the judgment differs on a one-to-one basis, in general the community accepts the circumstances provided by the steak user as justifying the shittiness of the meal and as such are willing to offer support and commiseration. The original poster is seen as a victim of circumstance; the poor quality of their food largely couldn't be helped, and as such the community offers them what support and assurance they can. On the dyed rice post, the sentiment is inverted. The community doesn't see the original poster's autism related dietary restrictions as circumstances that justify the ugly appearance of the food. They frame it as a self-inflicted injury; a pitfall easily avoided if the original poster has more sense or skill or willingness to just get over their circumstances. The advice offered is done so less as genuine means of supporting the poster and more as ways to illustrate their folly and how they could have easily avoided the issue.

In its own way, it comes to resemble a digital cult of affliction. First described by Victor Turner in his 1968 study of the Ndembu people of Zambia, the cult of affliction is originally figured as a very real therapeutic association where sufferers of illness and spiritual malady form

a community around their mutual affliction; healers and compatriots born of shared misery (1968). While shitty food porn is obviously very far from the cultural context in which such groups were originally understood, the structure of the resulting community bears an uncanny resemblance.

Among the sympathies, advice, and critiques offered by the commenters of r/shittyfoodporn is an air of consummate culinary understanding. Users provide detailed recipes, explicit instructions for how the original poster might have improved their meal, recommendations for thrifty ingredient shopping and easy elegant presentation, as well as support that belies a deeper understanding of cooking and the circumstances that sometimes limit it. On the aforementioned steak post, one comment thread had more than 50 replies with users discussing their own steak preparations and negotiating what methods work best for them and might work best for the original poster. Paired with the framing of the subreddit as *shitty food* porn, a self-admission of the food's faults and the implied failure of the chef, and the shittiness of the food comes to take the shape of an affliction. Through genuine kitchen experience or simple immersion on the highly technical and elegantly presented food internet, users have a working or even above average understanding of what "correct" cooking looks like and understand that their own kitchen mishaps are not necessarily the products of simple ineptitude but of wider societal circumstances that limit them. It's reminiscent of John Waters' famous idea that "there is such a thing as good bad taste and bad bad taste. [...] To understand bad taste one must have very good taste" (2005). They know better, know what "good" cooking looks like and how to achieve it, but their wider social burdens prevent them from reaching it. In such a way, the subreddit then resembles a community of the mutually afflicted, all getting a good kick out of a botched dinner or a sloppy stew, but also mutually salving each other's wounds at the preserved failure of the meal; healers born of mutual suffering.

There is a fascinating inversion of this relationship when the food pictured is prepared by someone other than the original poster. Since the subreddit coup, rules around whose food can be posted have tightened but at time of writing they still permit both food made by the poster as well as shitty food received from a restaurant. In the vast majority of cases, the community perceives getting bad food from a restaurant as circumstances in themselves and are willing to support the original poster on those bases alone, but instead of exclusively offering support they often take the offensive and attack the restaurant for their shoddy quality. When the affliction has a name and a face in the form of a specific restaurant, it can be taken to task. Inversely, in the exceedingly rare cases where restaurant food is posted and the community refuses to give commiseration, it is back to being the original poster's fault. "They should have known better than to order from such a terrible restaurant." "How could they have expected quality any better?" It is their own fault.

Under these circumstances, rejection of a post and refusal to offer commiseration is a rejection of affliction. It is the community telling a sufferer that they are not deserving because their claim to being afflicted is not an ill imparted onto them by the whims of the wider world, but instead an avoidable error they should have known better than to fall into. They are denied healing on the basis that they are not truly afflicted.

R/shittyfoodporn posts are of course evaluated on an individual user-to-user and post-to-post basis and there is rarely unanimous consensus over whether the circumstances are justifying support or not. Exceptionally ugly or comedic food might derail the comments away from any major discussion of support or commiseration, an original poster might initially earn sympathies but later be spurred based on their conduct in the comments section, or a post might be accepted or rejected based on the social inertia of an particularly lively early comment thread that swings

one way or the other. That said, there are some general trends in the circumstances presented by r/shittyfoodporn users in their posts and how the community reacts to them.

The most common circumstance is a simple lack of knowledge, effort, or ingredients. These are meals where someone tried and failed, cobbled together something they had in the fridge with little regard for beauty and arrangement, or had to make ill-fated ingredient substitutions. In these cases, the actual circumstances dictating the meal tend to be played down to merely an explanation of what happened and most of the posts and comments are usually focused on the comedy of the meal. It gives users an opportunity to share the humor of their kitchen mishaps and potentially salve the sting of an ugly meal with some virtual communal laughs. In those cases where lack of knowledge is the explicit dictating circumstance, users will often talk in the comments about ways of improving the meal, sometimes to the extent of sharing full recipes. The degree to which this advice is offered in a supportive or critical fashion is often dependent on exactly how bad the food is pictured and how the original poster frames their issue. For instance, one type of knowledge gap that is nearly universally met with criticism is lack of seasoning or misapplication of spices. Food that looks bland, pale, and otherwise unseasoned regularly gets raked over the coals by users who see that lack of cooking knowledge as so basic and important as to be the default.

Poverty and mental health are both two very common circumstances that are generally met with more support. Users will post their “depression lunches” or “struggle meals,” often cheap frozen or canned foods served on paper plates along with titles referencing their payday at the end of the week or comments touching on some food being better than nothing. Where it is not explicit, the details are sometimes coaxed out of an original poster in the comments, often with a half joking refrain along the lines of “everything alright at home OP?” or “You doing alright?” To some degree, the framing of poverty is built into the typical presentation of shitty

food porn. Given that the presentation of traditional food porn leans so heavily towards the gourmet, the upper class, and the prestige, it implicates that the visual archetype of “bad” food that shitty food porn pulls from heavily features preprepared, “low brow,” and cheaply made foods. Traditional food porn has so heavily conflated expensive and traditionally high-class food with quality that low quality food inherently takes on the airs of poverty and low class. The white breads, canned tuna, boxed chicken nuggets, and premade soups that make up shitty food porn’s backbone are considered shitty in part because of their association with poverty.

However, where that association of poverty is often seen as a signifier of low effort, the cheap ingredients and premade preparation a sign of laziness and unwillingness to do better as opposed to the limitations of circumstances, the users of r/shittyfoodporn generally exhibit a profound understanding of the ways the circumstances of poverty and mental health place limits on diet.

On posts where the primary circumstance of the meal’s shittiness are poverty or mental health struggles, users of the subreddit seem to overwhelmingly offer support to the original poster with the understanding that struggling under those conditions is more than reasonable. Under one post where a user shows their self-described “depression lunch,” commenters share their own anecdotes about depression and its resultant sad meals, encourage the original poster by saying eating something is always better than nothing, and generally support the idea that their meal is nothing to be ashamed of. One commenter says, “There is help out there, my friend” and another writes “At least you are eating my brother :) it’s better than nothing. You’re doing something right.”

Substance use holds a unique place in shitty food porn as a circumstance for food quality. Where smoking cannabis is generally accepted as a supremely valid circumstance for shitty food,

drinking is often met with variable reception contingent on how the original poster frames alcohol within their post. There are instances where users frame their drinking as celebratory or gleeful, sometimes posting nothing but a photo of their drink with a caption along the lines of “tonight's dinner.” In these cases, the circumstance of alcohol is typically met with a similarly jovial tone along the lines of “Cheers to that brother” or “glad to see another connoisseur” in reference to a shared beverage of choice. However, when consumption of alcohol is framed outside of this jovial context, say when a user shows a canned cocktail as part of their mid-day ‘depression meal,’ users tend to question if the original poster is doing well, offering words of support from similar periods of their life, and questioning if drinking in such a context is a good idea. In short, when drinking is itself the circumstance, user responses tend to be jovial and lighthearted. When drinking informs a different, more serious circumstance such as poverty, mental health struggles, or addiction, it serves to amplify the commiserative atmosphere and often prompt support from users with similar struggles, past or present.

Dietary practice as circumstance for shitty food is a particularly fraught subject on the subreddit, in no small part because it makes up a large proportion of the posts. Shitty food porn that is circumstantial to veganism is so common that it has been partially relegated to its own dedicated subreddit, [r/ShittyVeganFoodPorn](#), itself housing a substantial 133K user base. Part of the divisiveness of these posts (or at least the variability between supportive/commiserative responses and ridiculing one) is disagreement over the validity of the dietary practice as well as the execution of dietary preparation. Users posting shitty food porn seeking commiseration with their circumstances being practicing a particular diet face questions over whether the diet itself is valid (with most defaulting to the assumption that if the diet is rooted in bunk science, media hype, or general misinformation that it is totally invalid as a circumstance dictating shitty food) as well as questions over whether they are “doing the diet right.” Users are thus open to criticism



on two fronts, with commiseration and support typically being offered only if commenters agree that the diet has reasonable backing and that executing it effectively is difficult enough to warrant the occasional shitty failure.

All of this is compounded by the 'opt-in' or supposedly opt-in nature of many diets. Instructive here again is shitty vegan food porn, as well as its dietary foil, high protein/carnivorous diets. Diets partaken out of medical necessity, say low cholesterol or allergy restricted diets, are generally (but not always) accepted prima facie by the community, under the assumption that the poster has no other choice. For opt-in diets there is an added layer of skepticism, particularly when a diet is claiming health benefits under controversial evidence such as keto and carnivore diets. Skeptics deride the food and the original poster on the basis of their dietary choice. In one instance a post was even taken down on the basis of being intentionally shitty when depicting an ill-fated attempt at a sugar free cake with frosting. On the inverse, true believers who are defensive against the idea that their diet dictates poor quality food argue the issue of the original poster's preparation; treating the shittiness of the food as a personal failure of the poster rather than a limitation of the diet.

While it is difficult to verify without direct statement from r/shittyveganfoodporn users, the divisive nature with which opt-in diets are received as commiserative circumstances by the wider shitty food porn community may have been a leading factor in the formation of the subreddit as an independent entity. Looking at the community, it is clear that it's not intended to lambast veganism, setting up a dedicated community to criticize them specifically, but rather to form a subset of the community who are themselves vegan and thus automatically pass the first hurdle of believing the validity of veganism as a dietary practice. The community subset is specifically aimed at commiseration over the difficulty preparing vegan meals that look and taste good by other vegans who understand the struggle. This perspective is also informed by the

substantial presence of traditional vegan food porn as a cultural foil. The r/VeganFoodPorn subreddit currently stands as a much larger 359K users and reinforces many of the same unrealistic food visuals standards as traditional food porn along with the added difficulty that such food visuals must be achieved without the use of animal products.

All of this is not to say posts using dietary practice as the circumstance for their shitty food are totally without community support. Many users thread the needle of believing a dietary practice is necessary/valid and that working within its confines is a difficult enough circumstance to warrant shitty food. Users who partake in the same or similar diets offer commiseration and support in the form of recommendations or even full-blown recipes they have used to navigate the same issues. Additionally, even if users take issue with the dietary practice, a post riding on those circumstances can still succeed and garner support on the basis of its authenticity to the original poster or the raw humor of the food's appearance. However, as seen in the discrepancy between the steak post and the dyed rice post, the degree to which the community is willing to offer support often comes down to a case-by-case basis informed by the degree to which they see the diet as a circumstantial limitation or an active choice.

Lastly, it's important to touch on the small but significant portion of posts for whom patriarchy is its own sort of circumstance for shitty food. While a great deal of literature on traditional food porn focuses on its intersection with gendered presentations of food (Lupton 2019; Lupton 2020; McBride 2010; Dejmanee 2016), there are generally very few overt signifiers of gender within shitty food porn posts outside of very scant information in the titles or comments of posts. That said, there is a vein of shitty food porn posts where users will discuss their food's quality in terms of their own masculinity; mentioning how their wife is out of town and this is the best they can do or that this is the type of meal typically expected of a bachelor. They are posts that play into the gendered notion that men are unable to cook or should not be

expected to know how to cook, but surprisingly subreddit users are generally supportive, often commenting how good the food looks and how they would be happy to eat it. In some cases, commenters even bring this logic and the circumstance of maleness to posts that otherwise lack them, such as one case where a post a photo of their 2:00 am hot pocket, coffee, and vodka dinner was met with the reply “He is at the zenith of male satisfaction.” It is generally an understanding of food, quality, and gender that not only takes it as given that men shouldn't be expected to know how to cook or cook well, but that their maleness is on par with circumstances like poverty or mental health troubles in justifying bad food.

While these posts are not exceedingly common, they highlight a major limitation of the political power of shitty food porn to act as a defiant voice against the culinary and political standards that dictate normative food quality. While the communities keen awareness and interface with the social circumstances of food illustrates a rich understanding of the ways food quality is not merely a product of effort or a lack thereof, the communal disagreement over what counts as valid circumstances outside of a poster's control and what qualifies as an act of folly that they should have known better than to fall into has the potential to further entrench preexisting notions of good and bad food. Users support for posters limited by poverty, mental health, and general lack of kitchen training shows a cognizance of the social circumstances of food far beyond that of traditional food porn, but their rejection of other circumstances, particularly on the basis that those conditions are a user's own fault and that they should have been able to do better shows a regression back into the predefined idea that bad food is indicative of bad people who should have simply tried harder and done better.

Moreover, the commiserative framework in general largely understands food on the value basis that traditional food porn establishes, not trying to defy the boundaries but instead aiming to salve the wounds of bad food with social support around the perceived failure. It is taken as

given that the food is truly shitty, and the purpose of the support is not to deny that accusation but to explain it. By accepting that quality assessment as given, the community is fundamentally limited in its ability to challenge the culinary norms established by traditional food porn and analog food media more generally. However, outside of the commiserative dynamics of shitty food porn are more actively counter-cultural elements that aim to use the label of shitty not as a means to seek social support but instead as means to actively challenge what shitty means in the context of a meal.

### *Counter-Culture*

Late April 2024 saw a fairly popular post on the subreddit featuring a bisected baked potato and some pale under seasoned chicken, both messily smothered in tinned beans and shredded cheese. The post elicits the same types of comments one would typically expect – jokes about the food sloppy appearance, supporting messages that say the meal probably tastes good, and critical messages about how the chicken “died in vain” due to the lack of seasoning – but despite this it's clear the original poster's intentions are not to seek support over a perceived failure, but instead to highlight a perceived triumph. The title of their posts starts out with “I swear this slaps,” and mixed in among the comments are users who agree. One writes “I think people don't realize that some of the nastiest looking stuff is some of the most delicious.”

These posts are the foils of the previously discussed commiserative posts. Both use the humor-mediated authenticity the shitty food porn space provides them to show their food where it might otherwise be considered too ugly or too substandard to show off, but unlike the commiserative side of the community who seemingly post having accepted their food is bad and with the intention of connecting to others over the circumstances that dictated their bad outcome, the countercultural side of the community generally understand their food as good, even great, in

all qualities beyond aesthetics. They celebrate its defiance of typical culinary aesthetic norms and in doing so challenge both the metrics by which food quality is evaluated and the purpose of food media within that process.

It's important to note that these posts do not picture food that is somehow uninfluenced by the outside circumstances highlighted in other posts, nor do their posters aim to present it as such. The food pictured within these posts is just as likely to be the product of poverty, kitchen mishaps, the cook being stoned, or any other combination of wider circumstances, but commanding among them is the omnipresent circumstance that the original poster just like the food that way. The aesthetic experience of the food, what the subreddit user takes away from the meal through the photograph, becomes secondary to the experiential pleasure of the original poster and so long as it tastes good the rest can be damned.

A version of this behavior also exists among commenters on the posts of other users, even users seeking commiseration over their perceived failings. These comments usually manifest as something along the lines of “That looks like shit, but I would eat it in a heartbeat” or “would absolutely destroy that in seconds.” They are supportive comments but rather than focusing on commiserating over shared hardship or the circumstances that dictate the food being ugly, they invite the original poster and other users to look beyond the aesthetics and instead focus on the taste or nutrition of the meal. Like the countercultural posts themselves, these comments effectively reject the framing of visual food media and the breaking down of a meal’s quality exclusively down to its appearance as to be evaluated by strangers who will never consume the food in question.

As to why users upload this type of shitty food porn, why they choose to make media out of their meal as opposed to just relishing its taste on their own, the answer seems to come back to

humor. There is a noble notion that these posts are aimed at intentionally challenging the aesthetic food standards of traditional food porn, acting similar to the Raw fitness communities of Instagram that not only valorize authentic and realistic depictions of fitness training, but do so in partial protest against how the lens of social media creates a glamorized and ultimately unrealistic image of fitness (Reade 2021). This explanation may be more true of the comments, whose breed of support is specifically aimed at getting the original poster to look past the visuals of a meal, but among posters it seems more often to come back to the bedrock logic that failed food is often very funny.

By at least partially divorcing food visuals and personal evaluation of food quality, users are able to simultaneously understand the food as good, to their liking, and worthy of defense as well as looking bad to the point that it's funny in a way others online would appreciate. Posters often acknowledge the ugliness of their meals in the same breath they defend their quality and seem as eager as many of the commenters to toss out jokes and roasts about it in the comments. There is an element of gleeful contrarianism about it; revelling not only in the comedy of the situation but their position as the defiant individual who sticks with their conviction against the grain. "Yes, this peanut butter and hot sauce sandwich looks ugly; I don't care, it tastes amazing."

Initially, there seems to be an almost paradoxical conflict between the prevalence and popularity of these sorts of posts and the community's more general rejection of shitty food porn they see as fake or synthetic. In some regard, these posts do show food that is "shitty" on purpose. Their ugliness or unconventionality is generally not the byproduct of some mistake or collision of unfortunate circumstances, but rather a purposeful act by someone who understands the norm violations it entails and the humor it creates. The distinguishing element is intent, or at least perception of intent. The "fake" shitty food porn so reviled by the community is rejected on

the basis of its inauthenticity; that the food is being made primarily to be turned into media and social media engagement rather than actual subsistence. While this brand of counter-cultural shitty food porn is often made with full knowledge of its shittiness and humor, the food and the food media are made in spite of the shittiness rather than because of it.

Again, there is little to suggest the users and commenters engaging in this type of posting are doing so with the active intentions of challenging the visual standards of online food media or wider politics of food aesthetics, but intentional or not, there is argument to be made that it is doing very real, if minor, political work. In her post-feminist analysis of traditional food porn, sociologist Tisha DeJmanee makes the case that traditional food porn is in some ways a vehicle for women to engage in soft protest and challenge the gendered associations of food and cooking, but that the genre is ultimately a “failed liberation” held back by its adherence to conventions of beauty and aesthetic presentation that prevent it from deeply challenging the patriarchal roots of food media (2016). Under this framework, countercultural shitty food porn might represent the escalation of traditional food porn’s soft protest against the conventions of food media. It is difficult to make the same sort of post-feminist analysis of shitty food porn given its paucity of gender signifiers, but in its embrace of evaluating food on an individual experimental level and its rejection of assessing food quality through visual aesthetics, shitty food porn succeeds in challenging the established assumptions of food media in many of the places traditional food porn fails. Examined from a class perspective, shitty food porn implicitly accepts that food that is seen as cheap or low class can still be considered good, even extraordinary, and that it should be worthy of celebration regardless of its adherence to visual standards. In its open and gleeful defiance of notions of visual quality, shitty food porn is effectively unchained from the normative notions of quality within food media and is thus

uniquely equipped to challenge those notions in ways other food media has been fundamentally unable to.

While this is an optimistic outlook, it's important to temper it based on some observable similarities between shitty food porn and the carnivalesque extremes of traditional food porn. Digital food researcher Deborah Lupton was the first to specifically study the trend of “carnavalesque consumption” within online food media, with videos depicting “food products or meals that are culturally coded as ‘unhealthy’, ‘bad’ or ‘junk’” often being consumed in great quantities for the vicarious pleasure of the audience (2020, 36). Lupton argues that this genre of food content ultimately reproduces the same discourses of more traditional food porn, particularly as they relate to gendered presentation of food and the associations of gluttony and cardinal enjoyment of food as a rightful accomplishment for men and a sinful indulgence for women (2020, 45).

It is an argument that comes into focus around shitty food porn when examining what specifically makes the food “shitty” in those counter-cultural examples that are seemingly rejecting visual standards for food. In some cases, the shittiness is simply a quirk of clashing flavors or a sloppy meal constructed with no attention to visuals, but in many others the supposed shittiness comes to resemble the carnivalesque more than anything. Excessive quantities of fatty or sugary foods, meals built with no regard for presentation or health or anything beyond the shameless cardinal pleasure of the consumer.

It is a salient comparison that challenges the idea that this type of shitty food porn is truly challenging normative notions of food quality as opposed to stealthily embracing very gendered notions of types of eating as being sinful and indulgent, but there are stark differences between the two that complicate the comparison. Chiefly, while both carnivalesque food porn and shitty



food porn invite the viewer to enjoy the meal, the former ask them to vicariously enjoy the act of consumption but to understand the meal as a sinful indulgence that must be contextualized against the backdrop of its immorality, while the latter asks the viewer to laugh at the visual comedy of the food appearance while simultaneously asserting that the food is good regardless of its appearance. While there are in agreement over the notion that carnivalesque food is visually bad, or at least distinct from normative notions of good food presentation, carnivalesque food porn carries that association into moral assumptions about the food and therefore the consumer, while shitty food porn primarily figures the visuals as distinct from and ultimately unimportant to the actual quality of the food. Put differently, carnivalesque food porn violates the norms of food quality to illustrate and ultimately reinforce the norms; shitty food porn violates the norms to question why they exist in the first place. It's this that allows carnivalesque presentation to be only one of many types seen within counter-cultural shitty food porn, while straight carnivalesque food porn is bound entirely to the realm of supposedly indulgent meals and their associations with immorality.

## **Conclusion**

At the outset of this research, before entering the study site or reading any of the associated literature, the first motivating question on the topic was “Why is shitty food porn uniquely online?” Food media and its reflections of culinary culture have existed for hundreds of years with seemingly endless permutations therewithin, but a robust community and media genre like contemporary shitty food porn has only thrived in the internet age; Why? At least part of the answer seems to be that shitty food porn is a response. It's a response to changing technological social conditions that allow niche decentered communities to thrive without traditional media publication barriers. It's a response to traditional food porn, the normative notions of food quality it reinforces, and the way it demands hyper-performativity of an effortlessly glamorous diet &

lifestyle. It's a response to the ways a performative social media environment has driven desire for authenticity and spaces to communicate their lives and struggles as they are. The bedrock of shitty food porn, the innate base level comedy of failed food, is in many ways as instinctual as the disgust responses it is built off of, but shitty food porn as a community and genre of food media can only exist within these uniquely digital circumstances.

As an online community of authenticity, shitty food porn highlights the unique potential of humor as a mediating agent for authentic depictions of self. Rather than structuring the community around the valor of authenticity and praising those who effectively enact it, r/shittyfoodporn is centered around the comedy and the baseline humor of botched cooking. Framing the space as one of humor rather than cultural commentary not only leans into the internet's wider comic disposition and proclivity for humor, but also allows for a wider array of "authentic" performances outside of the glamorous norm and helps defend the community from being subsumed back into the normative food discourse it seeks to frame itself against. The joke of shitty food porn ceases to work when the food becomes glamorous, preventing shitty food porn from befalling the fates of other major online communities of authenticity. Paired with the fierce rejection of so-called "fake" shitty food porn by users and moderators alike, the subreddit comes to form a unique culinary community dedicated to the realities of inelegant cooking through mutual appreciation for the humor it creates.

The ways in which this space of humor facilitated authenticity is used by subreddit users is diverse but highlights both a keen awareness of the wider politics of food and a desire for communication and community in the face of a restricting social internet. On the one, users form a sort of digital cult of affliction, couching their posts in the wider circumstances that dictated their food's shittiness in the form of commiseration, advice, or merely some shared laughs to salve the wound of bad cooking. On the other, users revel in the shittiness of their meals,

embracing the comedy of the meal's appearance while advocating for its quality beyond its aesthetics and challenging the notion that food should be for the enjoyment of the media spectator as opposed to the actual diner. While these uses differ drastically in their employment of positive and negative affect, they share not only an acute awareness of the political circumstances of food - both as they exist in the lives of individuals and as part of online ecosystems – but a desire to authentically connect to others by means of food. It is a rejection of normative food aesthetics and an embrace of understanding food through its individual experiential realities and wider political circumstances that allows shitty food porn to surpass the mild protest aspirations of traditional food porn and be more directly critical of both food media and cultural construction of food quality more generally.

All of this is not to say that shitty food porn is a paragon of progressive food politics totally unbound from the cultural assumptions of its precursors and contemporaries. On the contrary, shitty food porn's positionality as a community of authenticity makes it deeply dependent on traditional food porn to define itself, authenticity only existing against the backdrop of a socially defined inauthenticity. By explicitly framing the community as the inferior parallel to the norm, shitty food porn is in many ways buying into its own status within preexisting normative hierarchies of food quality. Moreover, while humor-mediated authenticity has allowed the community to navigate many of the challenges faced by valorization-mediated communities of authenticity, the dedication to comedy first and foremost has restricted what sorts of authentic performance are allowed. As seen in the post subreddit-coup crackdown on less than shitty food kicked out of the normal r/foodporn community, when comedy is the bedrock, any authentic performance that is less than humorous is rejected in much the same fashion that posts that are less than beautiful are rejected by traditional food porn. Through these

means, the mechanisms of shitty food porn come to resemble those of traditional food porn functioning on a different axis.

Even within user activities aimed towards enacting authenticity, vestiges of normative food quality standards remain. For those users seeking commiseration by means of shitty food porn, a key part of the process is the community interpretation of the circumstances that dictated the meals quality. While the subreddit shows an impressive amount of understanding and compassion for circumstances like poverty, mental health, and substance abuse, their support is not universal. Those circumstances deemed unworthy of commiserative support not only resemble many of the normative food standards that precede shitty food porn, but universally lean on the individualistic idea that the foods poor quality is the fault of the original poster; that if they has just been smarter or less lazy or applied themselves more they could (and should) have done better. Even among counter-cultural shitty food porn posters who seem most willing to clash with normative food standards, have fun bending the definition of good food, and challenge the purpose of food in a culinary media environment, those meals they end up posting often come to resemble the carnivalesque conventions of traditional food porn with all of their associated cultural baggage.

Taken in its totality, shitty food porn does not represent a totally liberated food media genre. It is, like traditional food porn before it and food television and cookbooks before that, deeply entrenched in hundreds of years of both culinary politics and media convention that shape its depictions of good and bad food and by extension good and bad ways of living. All of that said, shitty food porn does in many ways come to resemble an amplification of the most online tendencies of contemporary food media. It is a genre that could only thrive through the democratized and widely available media production and publication technologies of the contemporary social internet. Its content is informed by online trends towards comic disposition,

rejection of a perceived inauthenticity among social media spaces, and a desire to reach out and communicate with other human beings in a way the internet uniquely mediates.

At no point during the months of observations did a user on r/shittyfoodporn explicitly state their aim was to disrupt trends in online food media. They litigated what counted as real or fake shitty food porn, argued over what the post-coup fate of the subreddit should be, and fought to ensure the community was always about humor over anger, but these discussions were never aimed at making shitty food porn a vehicle for criticism against normative food standards and the media that upholds them. Rather, users were focused on keeping the space fun, open, human, and generally a place where people came not to harvest social media engagement but because they enjoyed the food and the human conversation it facilitated. By means of the ways it enables authentic representations of self and runs counter to traditional food porn, it does perform a great deal of implicit criticism of traditional food media, explicit support for non-normative presentation of food, and general discussion around the social politics that determine who eats what, but these are all byproducts of the wider pursuit for an online culinary community.

### *Limitations & Further Research*

Despite its niche status, there is still major potential for further research on shitty food porn as a unique culinary media culture and as an online community of authenticity. Initially, the ethnographic portion of this research was supplemented with interviews from community members and moderation team. However, after months of reaching out to users, not a single one agreed to an interview and this component of the research effort had to be scrapped. While it's possible this lack of respondents says something about the shitty food porn community in specific, it's far more likely that it's indicative of wider trends on Reddit as a platform,

particularly how spam messages sent by bots disincentivize users from interacting with cold call direct messages.

Luckily, this setback was offset by the frequent posts made by the new r/shittyfoodporn moderation team after the subreddit coup, with many asking questions similar to those on the interview schedule and garnering a far greater response than could have been achieved through direct interviewing. This opened a window into the community's perspective on how they define shitty food porn and what they believe the function of the community is, but future work would greatly benefit from direct participant interviews.

All of the observations this study has been built off of have come from the r/shittyfoodporn community for the reasons discussed in the methodology section, but over the course of data collection the specific allowances (and limitations) of Reddit as a platform came to the surface, particularly when comparing the content of r/shittyfoodporn to that of its sister subreddit, r/stupidfood. r/stupidfood is a similarly sized community at 1.9 million users after nine years of history, and at first blush it seems extremely similar to r/shittyfoodporn. The subreddit share a mutual focus on food media depicting “bad” food, but where r/shittyfoodporn is almost entirely bespoke content with a dual focus on comedy and authenticity, r/stupidfood largely consists of food media reposted from other platforms like TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram and the community tenor is far more antagonistic. As the name implies, it's a community about calling food stupid and by extension ridiculing the cooks who prepare it. Some of the content is food the original poster obviously intended as traditional food porn, some of it seems intentionally made to be as bad as possible, and much of it skirts the line between the two and leaves the motivations of the original cook ambiguous. As the users of r/shittyfoodporn described it in that initial post-coup moderator townhall thread, it's a lot of “rage bate” content intended to make users mad and drive engagement through their anger.

While both subreddits are digital communities of ugly eating, the degree to which they differ and the particular lengths r/shittyfoodporn has gone to in order to restrict the type of content r/stupidfood thrives on indicates a wider depth to the social mechanisms of shitty food porn that are beyond the limits of this study. Moreover, the distinct differences between the bespoke content of platforms like Reddit, where users have little to no ability to make monetary gains off of their posts, and content reposted from platforms like TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram, where users have the ability to directly monetized their content through advertiser revenue, indicates an economic element to the discussion that is underserved through a sole focus on r/shittyfoodporn. Other researchers have discussed how online communities of authenticity are affected by the pressures of monetization and the engagement economy more generally (Reade 2021; Abidin 2018), but the ways in which this can be seen within digital food communities, shitty or otherwise, is thus far unresearched.

Lastly, the ways in which shitty food porn comes to resemble a humor-mediated community of authenticity raises questions about the ways in which online communities of authenticity can organize themselves and how that organization has continued to change on the evolving internet. Prior online authenticity studies largely focus on valorization-mediated communities of authenticity that praise authenticity in response to a perceived inauthenticity of mainstream online communities, often with the side effect of the aesthetics of authenticity being subsumed into the aesthetics of the mainstream (Reade 2021). Questions remain about how other forms of online authenticity mediation might function and how those communities might emerge not only as responses to their mainstream counterparts, but also in response to the preserved “selling out” of prior communities of authenticity once subsumed into the mainstream.

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