



**UiT** The Arctic University of Norway

The Department of Social Sciences

## **Adaptation and Staying Social:**

Ways of Coping and the Use of Virtual Spaces During the Covid-19  
Pandemic as Observed in the USA

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# Table of Contents

Preface .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
Abstract .....	3
1 Introduction .....	4
1.1 Background: the beginning of the pandemic.....	4
1.2 First There Were Jokes.....	6
1.3 Conspiracy theories on social media .....	6
1.4 Protests in the USA .....	7
1.5 My life in Norway as a US citizen juxtaposition to life portrayed on social media in the USA.....	8
2 Methodology .....	10
2.1 Access to the field .....	10
2.2 Digital ethnography .....	11
2.3 Anthropology from home?.....	12
2.4 Reflexivity.....	13
2.5 Data Collection and use of material .....	14
3 Theoretical approaches.....	17
3.1 Humor.....	17
3.2 Risk and Uncertainty .....	18
3.3 Adaptation .....	19
4.1 The whole map is red .....	21
4.2 Humor and Memes .....	22
4.3 Conspiracy theories .....	28
4.4 Protest.....	32
4.5 Adaptation .....	34
Louie.....	35

Shelly.....	36
Hannah and Paul.....	38
Staying social during lockdowns.....	40
Adapting after lockdowns .....	43
5 Conclusion.....	46
Works cited .....	48

# Preface

The focus of this thesis is the use of the internet and social media in the USA during the Covid-19 pandemic between March and August of 2020. My fieldwork was slated to take place between April and August of 2020. During this time, I was living in Tromsø, Norway though I am a US citizen. This, in part, is the reason my thesis focuses on my chosen topic. This pandemic has affected the entire world and is ongoing. Cases are still increasing globally as are Covid-19 related deaths. In lieu of all of this, my research had to stop at some point. For all intents and purposes, the information discussed in this paper all occurred between February and September of 2020, though I could easily have continued to collect data on this subject.

Furthermore, the focus of this paper is no way meant to disregard any other major events which took place between February and September of 2020, many of which we are still seeing the effects of a year later. I had to keep my aim specific, therefore this paper will not discuss posts on social media regarding Black Lives Matter, the civil unrest in the USA over the many police killings of unarmed black individuals including George Floyd and Breanna Taylor, protests (armed or peaceful) on the matter of presidency, murder hornets, the wildfires along the west coast of the USA, riots and looting, police brutality towards peaceful protesters and members of the media, or any other topics I may be forgetting at this time. Though these issues are incredibly important to address, they are too vast for the scope of this thesis and I in no way want to negate them.

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Thank you to all my research participants. To those who allowed me to capture their posts online to use in my film and analyze in this paper. To Hannah, Paul, Louie, my dad Art and my mom Carol, thanks for allowing me to film and discuss your situations back home and thoughts on the pandemic over the phone and Zoom. To the students at Breivika, we captured the initial moment the pandemic affected us in Norway, and it stands as record of our perceptions on what was to come. To my friends in Tromsø, thank you for being a part of my film. Thanks to Håvard for allowing me to film at Huken Brygg. Thank you to the members of Apokosmos for allowing me to use their music in my film. Much appreciation to Alexander Reynolds for loaning me his laptop when mine was unrepairable. Thank you to my wonderful partner Maria, who not only took part in my film but also in every aspect of my life during the pandemic. I could not have done this without the support of the aforementioned individuals.

## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the entire world (Worldometer 2021). Some regions are worse off than others though. One of these areas is the United States of America which has been recorded having the highest number of Covid cases and deaths in the world, with 33,419,113 cases and 594,912 deaths from Covid-19 as of May 08, 2021 (Worldometer 2021). Despite its alarming numbers, citizens there remain divided regarding every aspect of the pandemic. This is evident on social media sites such as Facebook, where people have been posting conspiracy theories, YouTube videos of doctors claiming there is no pandemic, images of themselves at parties and out dining in restaurants, defying mask ordinances and other government implemented restrictions in public in protest while jeopardizing their safety as well as others. Simultaneously other citizens are posting on social media and sharing their stories of having personally had or someone they know having had Covid-19, pictures of people intubated in intensive care units, videos of scientists like Dr. Anthony Fauci, the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (Ott 2021), and others from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO) imploring people to follow safety guidelines and to take the pandemic seriously, and even announcements of deaths from Covid-19. Additionally, people have used the internet and social media to remain social with friends and family during lockdowns, and use Zoom to work from home or attend school. Some people have created new businesses during the pandemic and use the internet to advertise, connect, or make sales. This paper addresses how people in the USA used the internet and social media to remain social during lockdowns and adapted to the pandemic, from early March 2020 until late August 2020. With the use of participant observation and anthropological theories, I will present what I observed online from Norway, that was taking place in my home of the USA during this period.

keywords: hope, uncertainty, Facebook, Zoom

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background: the beginning of the pandemic

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization classified Covid-19 as a pandemic (Brannen et al. 2020, 1) the effects of which became a reality for me the next day. I was living in Tromsø, Norway as a master's student. On this day it was announced Norway would go into lockdown (Vanderberg 2020). Uncertainty and worry consumed my thoughts. I feared for my friends and family back home, and for my own situation in Norway. Simultaneously, I began seeing countless posts on Facebook (FB) by people back home in the USA regarding the coronavirus and the ensuing pandemic. The posts ranged from humorous memes, conspiracy theories, protests against the shutting down of businesses, armed protests, and scientific articles about the coronavirus. I began to take screenshots of these posts with cellphone. By observing these posts in early March, I developed a thesis which centered on the use of social media to spread information regarding the pandemic back home in the USA. My first act was to keep taking screenshots of these pandemic related posts. I then began to investigate research regarding conspiracy theories and humor in times of crisis. A week after Norway's lockdown, the USA implemented a mandatory lockdown in many states as well (Gillaspia 2020). Once this took place my FB feed was full of conspiracy theories regarding the pandemic and lockdowns.

The lockdown in Tromsø, Norway was lifted in May and the bars, restaurants and stores opened back up, though travel restrictions remained in place (Nikel 2020). The weather was warm and bar patios were full of patrons. Life was as it had been before the lockdown and there were no social distance requirements implemented. I thought perhaps this would all be over soon. At the writing of this paper the pandemic is not over though, and it continues to get worse. Across the globe people have lost jobs, been infected with Covid-19, lived in self isolation, had to quarantine, and even died from Covid-19. Covid cases increased again in Norway after the lockdown was lifted. Some areas were hit much harder than others. Bars and restaurants here were operating like normal one day, but then restrictions were once again put into effect, and they had to close again. For a period, busses had put black garbage bags with a taped 'X' over every other seat, to signify they were not to be sat in to keep people distanced. Later in the pandemic the wearing of masks was suggested while on public transportation or any time one could not be one meter apart from another person. While I was

living through the pandemic and its effects here in Tromsø, I was seeing its effects in the USA were very different. Here we were following guidelines. From what I saw on social media, it seemed like the US was divided. There were those who were imploring others to follow guidelines, to stay home, to avoid contact with friends and family, all to slow or stop the spread of Covid-19. At the same time others were protesting having to wear masks and the lockdowns. Protest took on different forms. Some stormed capitol buildings armed with assault rifles, pistols, and even a rocket launcher. Others protested online in the form of opinions and memes. This divide seemed to originate with how people viewed the pandemic. Some saw its effects firsthand when they or people they knew were infected with Covid. Others trusted the scientists, CDC and WHO. Meanwhile, those protesting the lockdowns and the restrictions were also sharing conspiracy theories regarding the virus and the pandemic. These topics will be addressed in later chapters in greater detail.

As the pandemic unfolded and people lost their jobs and/or had to close their businesses, I began to see some adapting to this “new normal” by the creation of new businesses or avenues of income. The service industry in the USA was stopped, so employees had to adapt. Unemployment benefits were taking longer than usual for some due in part to the entire economy stopping all at once. Bar and restaurants continued to close permanently, unable to recover from the effects of lockdown and the pandemic. Some of my research participants in the USA had this happen to them but adapted and now have lucrative businesses which will be discussed further in chapter 4.

Due to these ups and downs, I decided to center my thesis on the pandemic and the use of the internet and social media in the USA. What started as observing memes on FB, turned into following conspiracy theories, and developed into watching the USA become divided regarding the pandemic. Protests took place against lockdowns and mask restrictions. In what seemed like chaos, I also observed individuals adapting to maintain being social via the internet. I propose that ongoing themes of uncertainty or sociality, motivated the posts I observed during my fieldwork.

My observations are arranged in these categories: humor, conspiracy theories, protest, and adaptation, which is chronologically how they appeared on social media during my fieldwork. In this paper I will use the terms coronavirus and Covid-19 interchangeably, reflecting how it was referred to at different stages of the pandemic. My research aims to illustrate how people in the US remained social during the pandemic, first with the use of the



internet and FB, and further how people adapted to the pandemic both during lockdowns and after they were lifted. Through participant observation and discussions over Zoom, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger, I will provide an understanding for the events that took place in the USA between March and August of 2020. I aim to answer the questions, “What drove the spread of misinformation and humor during a time of crisis,” “How people dealt with injustices they felt due to governmental restrictions imposed on them,” and “How people maintained being social during lockdowns and adapted to lifestyle changes brought on by the pandemic.”

## **1.2 First There Were Jokes**

My motivation for this thesis grew from observations on my FB feed in late February and early March of 2020. They began as memes joking about the coronavirus. These memes poked fun at the name coronavirus by comparing it to Corona beer. They also included puns about China, bats, and fast-food establishments in the USA. Memes of this kind were shared on my social media by people in the USA. At this point the pandemic had not affected the USA to the extent that it has at the time of this writing. I will illustrate later in this paper how those in the USA sharing memes at this time, were distanced from the coronavirus as its effects had not caused restrictions for them yet, and this distance provided a means of coping with the virus from afar through humor.

## **1.3 Conspiracy theories on social media**

The first post that caught my attention regarding conspiracies was a very long thread that stated the lockdowns were all part of a plan to keep people inside so police across the globe could easily arrest high profile individuals involved in the sex trafficking of children and pedophile rings. Though this post was made very early during the lockdowns, conspiracy theories regarding pedophiles and the elite did resurface with a vengeance in May 2020.

The next conspiracy theory floating around the internet was that the coronavirus was caused from the newly installed 5G cellphone towers that were erected coinciding with the spread of the coronavirus (Sturm and Albrecht 2020). Memes and articles were shared comparing the effects of the virus to that of radiation from the 5G towers. This idea evolved into a larger conspiracy theory that centered on politics in the USA. People stated that for every election year going back 6-8 elections (24-36 years) a different viral outbreak occurred shortly before the election and was used as a scare tactic.

Information was shared in news articles speculating where and why the novel coronavirus was created. FOX news claimed that it originated at a lab in Wuhan, near the market believed to be the epicenter of the virus and there was a cover-up taking place to conceal this information (Baier and Re 2020). Speculation was also made that a US government agency, the US National Institutes of Health, gave \$3.7 million to the Wuhan lab (Owen 2020). In the article Owen (2020) made further connections to the US and the Wuhan lab conducting viral testing on bats, eluding that an infected bat from the Wuhan lab was the source for the coronavirus and not a Wuhan seafood market. People stated that an American Harvard professor and doctor who was working in the Wuhan lab was testing the virus on bats and one escaped, introducing the virus into the population and thereby creating the pandemic. Simultaneously, it was reported that this professor and his two Chinese research assistants had been picked up by the FBI. I will illustrate how the spreading of such information during the beginning of the pandemic, led to jokes shared on social media as well as having fueled conspiracy theories.

## **1.4 Protests in the USA**

As conspiracy theories were shared, the pandemic worsened in the USA. Cases and deaths rose, making the USA the country with the most cases (Worldometer 2021). Due to this, different states implemented different regulations regarding lockdowns and the mandatory wearing of masks. It seemed as soon as an announcement was made regarding these restrictions, the masses took to social media, and the streets, in protest. On my social media I saw posts of people refusing to stay home and continued to jog at the lakefront in Chicago. Some still gathered in groups. Many across the states refused to wear masks to slow

the spread of Covid-19. Not only did people protest the mask rule, but some also went so far as to post videos of themselves in groups yelling at people for wearing masks. Some even shared videos of themselves pulling masks off people who were wearing them. When lockdowns were implemented, people protested in front of government buildings, armed with rifles and pistols (Vox 2020). They demanded the reopening of closed businesses, mostly under the pretense that the pandemic was a hoax. Rhetoric from the US president fueled this idea when he stated that this was indeed a hoax created by the democrats (Sturm and Albrecht 2020). Lupton (2006, 11-24) wrote that, “human responsibility is now attached to risk,” and we must rely on the advice of experts, but we are suspicious of the judgements of those experts. This could not be more true with regards to the posts and actions of people in the US during the pandemic. What I was observing online seemed to be complete chaos and a disregard for others. Some people did not listen to the experts such as Dr. Fauci, the CDC or WHO, and even went so far as to share videos of doctors and nurses “debunking” what other experts advised.

## **1.5 My life in Norway as a US citizen juxtaposition to life portrayed on social media in the USA**

Life for me in Tromsø was different than what I was seeing being shared on social media and in the news back home. When the lockdown occurred here, I bought a bunch of dried goods for fear our supermarkets may close. They never did and I constantly had access to groceries, including toilet paper, which many countries were hoarding and fanatical about purchasing. So much so that stores back home were out of toilet paper regularly and had to limit the amount one could purchase. I was living in student housing at this time, but when we locked down, my girlfriend asked me to stay with her. We have been living together ever since.

During the initial lockdown we stayed inside our apartment. We only left to get groceries. There was no mask mandate, nor did anyone here wear one. We followed the guidelines and washed our hands frequently. Though everything was closed in Tromsø, people did not seem concerned or worried. The number of cases remained low here. We spent

our time binging shows on HBO and Netflix. I began to keep a record of the spectacular meals I was cooking for us. Things remained this way from March until May when businesses opened again.

As restrictions became looser, we had a few people over for the 17<sup>th</sup> of May celebration. I was told, typically there is a parade, and everyone is out on the town but because of the restrictions and closures this would not occur this year. Despite this, we got dressed up, made wonderful food, and had a lovely party. Life here seemed surreal compared to what I was observing online. Shortly after 17<sup>th</sup> of May, we started to go to the beach and grill sausages, despite it being 3° C. When the weather warmed up, we went fishing. Businesses reopened and I got a job bartending. Life was operating without interruption and people seemed to not miss a beat. Meanwhile, businesses were opening and closing in the states. Friends of mine were unemployed, mostly in the arts and food and beverage industries. Many US citizens took to working from home and later, teaching would also occur over Zoom, or through home schooling. Though daily life was great here, I was very skeptical of what we were doing because I was comparing my life here to that of people back home across the US. I wondered how things could be normal here, but such a disaster in my home country. Though we found some normalcy here in Tromsø, I could not help feeling anxiety and fear over the entire situation. We were still in a pandemic. Friends of mine were getting Covid-19 back home. People were protesting and refusing to follow CDC and WHO guidelines. I was worried for them and myself. For a few months things here seemed to be sane and normal, though what I was observing online back home looked like complete chaos.

## **2 Methodology**

In this chapter I will explain how I gained access to the field in which I worked. I will explain the methods by which I observed and recorded data between March and September of 2020. I will also reflect on my positionality during fieldwork and the use of my camera and other technologies to make my thesis film.

### **2.1 Access to the field**

It was not difficult to gain access to the field in which I conducted my research. It was one that I was already a member of, and my research participants were friends and family not only on social media, but those who I know personally in real life. The first group with whom I worked was for only one day. They were fellow students who I lived with in student housing. I was given permission to film them for a class exercise. While I was filming general shots, friends began to come to me and talk about the pandemic, as they were reading the news on their phones. I was able to capture these moments with my camera. As stress and uncertainty heightened in our residence, they were all eager to discuss the news of the pandemic and the shopping plans they were making. I did not know this at the time, but I had captured a crucial moment of our lives in the initial stages of the pandemic here in Tromsø and this footage is one of the first scenes in my thesis film.

The next day after filming in my student housing we went into lockdown. I had moved in with my partner Maria and fieldwork was suspended. Not knowing what I would do for my thesis, I began capturing screenshots on my cell phone, of posts regarding the pandemic on social media. I continued to do this throughout my fieldwork and by the end, had over 2,000 screenshots of posts. Accessing this digital field was easy as it was my social media accounts and those sharing posts were friends of mine, some in real life, others just on FB. Those who were habitually sharing posts about the pandemic became my focus and they allowed me to take screenshots of their posts. When using these posts in my film or this paper I did crop out or blur names and faces, unless they were those of specific participants whose images or names would be known from my film or paper. I did not do this for very close friends or family as they allowed me to use their likeness in my work. This is true for the main

characters in my film who are also discussed in chapter 4. They were friends and family members who I already had relationships with, and they granted me permission to record our conversations over the phone and Zoom. The final aspect of the field was exterior shots in and around Tromsø. These include beaches, my place of work, my home, and other public places. There was not much access to gain for my project in these spaces as they are public areas, I only needed to obtain consent from the individuals who shared the space with me and those in front of the camera, which was granted.

## **2.2 Digital ethnography**

When the pandemic hit Norway, and lockdowns followed shortly after, I was advised to adapt my thesis to the current situation. Ideas were shared on alternative ways to conduct fieldwork. Many of these ideas centered around digital ethnography and I utilized what Postill and Pink (2012:123) refer to as “the internet as an ethnographic site,” and also documented posts regarding the pandemic as an “Internet Event.” Conducting digital ethnography involves making use of the same methods and principals that are used in the field, only they are applied in virtual and digital spaces (Hart 2017:2). This included participant observation in the digital space, which in my research occurred mainly over Zoom. Hart (2017:5) also notes that screenshots are captured in digital ethnography as a recording method and my screenshots became my fieldnotes. I stored them all chronologically on my external hard drive and when going back to them, I can see the progression of thoughts regarding the pandemic as it occurred. Digital ethnography is a means to understand online culture and sociocultural structure (Hart 2017:6). Taking screenshots of memes and people’s ideas and comments between each other posted on social media allow for a sociocultural understanding in the same way capturing someone’s words or actions with a camera does. They are an exact account of what was said which can be discussed in greater detail after they were posted, for the ethnographer to gain deeper insight. Consideration must be taken that the meaning of these posts is not misunderstood when removed from their cultural context (Barratt and Maddox 2016:703). This was not difficult for me because I am a part of the culture I researched.

It has been suggested that when conducting digital ethnography, it makes sense to be among the culture within which one is conducting the fieldwork as there are benefits to living within the culture one is researching (Postill and Pink 2016:123). I did not have the opportunity to do this during my research as we were not allowed to travel due to the pandemic and I had to remain in Tromsø. Though I do agree with this concept, I do not think it was necessary in my research because I am a part of the culture I was observing and working with. Additionally, remaining in Tromsø to conduct fieldwork digitally that was occurring in the US provided me the advantage of observing life there with my life juxtaposition to theirs. This allowed me to construct a reflexive autoethnography for my thesis film.

## **2.3 Anthropology from home?**

Peirano (1998, 122-123) describes anthropology from home as, “The study of one’s own society, where ‘others’ are both ourselves and those relatively different from us, whom we see as part of the same collectivity.” Using this definition as a starting point, I had to ask myself if during my fieldwork I was conducting anthropology from home. In anthropological fieldwork there is usually a separation between home base and the field (Peirano 1998, 113). In my research my home base was not in the US, but I am from there and a user of Facebook, and most my research involved observing posts on Facebook by people back home in the US. I watched how their lives were affected by the pandemic in the states, though my pandemic experience occurred abroad in Norway. Conducting anthropology at home infers the anthropologist not only shares the language with their participants, but also a large part cultural system and ontology (Chock 1986, 87). Though I identify as part of the culture I was observing and participating with, and belong to it, I was not there experiencing the pandemic as they were. For this reason, I thought no, I was not conducting anthropology from home as I was physically not back home in the US during my fieldwork period. I then had to reassess my idea of home. Initially I viewed home as the USA, but as the months went on, the pandemic worsened, and lockdowns were implemented both here in Norway and the US. I noticed another home, one on the internet. Yes, people were physically in the confines of the dwelling in which they reside back in the states as I too was here in Norway, but I noticed other “homes” being created during the pandemic. These were online homes, places where

people with shared interests conversed and posted pictures of food they made or held Zoom meetings where not only were they adapting and working from home or attending class, but they were creating a space to stay social and drink with friends, gamble, and sing karaoke. Though I was not home in the US, I was in this virtual home conversing with friends and family on FB and over Zoom while participating in digital ways to stay social. In this sense I was conducting anthropology from home, the home many of us found online to stay social and adapt to the pandemic.

There is another meaning of the term anthropology from home that has been reinforced during the lockdowns which have occurred on and off during the last year. This is the literal sense of being in one's home conducting anthropological research online. This differs from what I mentioned above, as this relates more to digital ethnography in itself. During the period of lockdowns, the only option available to many anthropologists was anthropology from home, their own homes, as this was the only means to collect ethnographic material during those times (Goralska 2020, 50). Peirano (1998, 110) states that an interpretation of a culture is shaped by culture itself. This idea was very valid when I was analyzing memes in my research. Many of them have distinct cultural references and having an emic perspective was necessary to understand many of them. Though I was not in the US when these memes were shared, I still understand the cultural references since I belong to that culture and have lived there for all my life. Overall, I will state that yes, I was conducting anthropology from home, even though I was not physically back home in the USA during my fieldwork, simply because I was working within my own culture in a shared digital home we constructed during lockdowns, and still maintain and make use of today.

## **2.4 Reflexivity**

There was another consideration I had to take when I chose this project for my thesis. As discussed in the above section, I am from the US and was conducting research regarding the pandemic taking place in my home country. This gave me an emic perspective and it was easier to relate and understand phenomena that I was recording during fieldwork. For this reason, my positionality in this project is important. Robertson (2002) makes the claim that positionality, "is premised on ever more specific categories of identity that can invoke a kind



of cultural relativity,” with respect to anthropologists. She further discusses how positionality can be a form of “self-stereotyping” (Robertson 2002). Though I do agree with these points, I felt it necessary to categorize myself at the start of this thesis. I feel it is necessary for the reader to understand that I am speaking as someone from the US about what I observed and participated in, though from a vast distance, which took place in the US even though I was in Norway conducting my fieldwork. This understanding does not serve to make me an authority on the subjects discussed but gives credence to my emic perspective.

Because of my positionality I had to practice reflexivity and make a distinction between the etic and emic. Davies (2008, 4) explains that reflexivity is, “A turning back on oneself,” and “a process of self-reference,” and is necessary when the researcher and the society being researched is particularly close. My emic perspective as discussed in chapter 4.2 gave me a better understanding of the cultural references in the memes I describe and how people back home adapted when they lost their jobs. I found their circumstances relatable as I have gone through similar situations in the US, though not during a pandemic. My etic perspective is illustrated when I discuss my lived experience during the pandemic in Norway juxtaposition to my participants lived experience in the states. In these instances, we experienced the pandemic differently and this is explained in greater detail in my thesis film and in chapter 4. This dual positionality has allowed me to analyze findings from both emic and etic perspectives.

## **2.5 Data Collection and use of material**

This master’s thesis is in visual anthropology and therefore the use of the video camera was to play an integral role in recording material. A happy accident occurred for me at the beginning of the pandemic here in Norway. One day in early March, I was recording shots in my student housing for a class exercise before the lockdown occurred. It just so happened that the pandemic had hit Norway and panic was setting in among the students. I used this opportunity to film them in our shared kitchen as they made plans to go grocery shopping to stock up before panic ensued. Jokes were made, news of the pandemic was shared, and I was convinced to go grocery shopping with my friends before the stores had empty shelves, just

like those I had shared on social media by people in the US. This initial moment of panic, which I happened to capture on video, set the stage for the rest of my thesis.

Not long after that moment the US was under lockdown too. My feed on social media was flooded with the beforementioned posts (see 1.2). It was at this time I began collecting the bulk of my material. I captured screenshots from my phone of the posts I was seeing daily regarding the pandemic. Additionally, I took screenshots of all the news articles that were shared regarding the pandemic and then sent myself links to said internet articles through my email. I utilized this method of collecting data for the bulk of my research from March through September of 2020. When I stopped collecting screenshots, I had accumulated over 2000 and additional 270 links to news articles regarding the pandemic. Initially I organized the screenshots on an external hard drive by the month I had captured them. I then created subfolders arranged by content label as jokes, conspiracy theories, protest, consequence, and adaptation. This allowed me to keep a chronology of the pandemic and the thought processes taking place over social media. Additionally, it made it easier to go back and find materials when I need them in editing and analysis.

As we got deeper into the pandemic, I began to record myself with my video camera. I aimed to keep a record of my life throughout this period. I recorded myself cooking at home, conversations with my family back home, and then myself telling my pandemic experience to the camera. When restrictions were lifted in Tromsø, I ventured out to record exterior shots of the city. When friends and I went to the beach to grill and have fun, I brought my camera and recorded that as well. The camera served as a video diary, and time capsule containing footage I used for analysis in this paper and in the editing of my thesis film. Though most of the recording took place on my main camera which was loaned to me by my department at UiT, I also utilized my phone's video camera and my GoPro. This allowed me to shoot multiple angles while recording life unfolding and during interviews over Zoom. Data collecting also occurred through messages via Facebook and WhatsApp. These serve as records of life taking place during my fieldwork period.

One of the most important aspects of collecting data was with my laptop. I utilized OBS recording software to record my screen while involved in participant observation and Zoom during interviews with research participants. I recorded online poker and blackjack games in the US and Canada, Zoom karaoke in Los Angeles, California, and Facebook posts regarding the pandemic. I also recorded conversations I had with people in the states over

Zoom, using its built-in record option. The latter discussions allowed my participants to express in their own words, their actions which I had been observing online from the start of the pandemic, until the end of my fieldwork.

The time difference also played a factor. Tromsø is between nine and six hours ahead of the time zones my research participants were in. This did not matter much when I was scrolling through FB looking at their posts, but it made it difficult to arrange convenient times for us to have Zoom interviews, phone conversations, or my participating in online events over Zoom like karaoke and attending virtual gatherings my friends had arranged. I overcame this though by setting up times that were best for them, even when it meant I was conducting an interview at 5 AM my time while my partner was sleeping in the next room.

One of my main difficulties in this project was utilizing all the screenshots I had collected during fieldwork. I knew I had to make a 30-minute film, and that I wanted to use them in it, but I did not know how to. It was important to me to set the memes to music and elicit a feeling of chaos and discomfort from my audience, as this was how I felt seeing these posts daily. As our discussions went on during film and text seminars, and I played edited footage of my film, I began to understand that this project was not just about the posts on social media any longer. It had evolved into a story about the pandemic, one which I centered around myself. The use of memes in my film became less of the focal point and the focus shifted to me and my life juxtaposition to my participants in the US both online and in their real lives. Once I realized this, I was able to develop a narrative structure around my life here during fieldwork, but also included memes in the film. I used them not only in a sequence to music to make the viewer feel as I did seeing them every day, but additionally as an ongoing theme that guides the film, along with my self-tape, and in some individual sequences and transitions. When speaking to Hannah, Paul, Louie, and my mom, I used the memes they shared on social media about which they were speaking or referencing for the viewer to not only hear them tell their stories in hindsight, but also see how their stories unfolded online. This was different in the scenes when I am speaking on the phone to my mom. In these scenes I placed screenshots from news articles over our dialogue about which we were discussing. Lastly, I used memes as transitions between scenes and in most instances, they foreshadow what was coming next.

### 3 Theoretical approaches

In this chapter I will discuss the theoretical approaches I utilized when analyzing my fieldwork. I will introduce the theories through which I sought to understand the phenomena I observed.

#### 3.1 Humor

Humor is a mode of communication (Olah and Hempelmann 2021, 334) and a way to cope with uncertainty (Bouwmeester 2013, 41). Humor may be used to understand and explain people's emotions and allows us to understand them in a local context (Swinkels and Koning 2016, 7-10). McGraw and Warren (2009, 1141) state, "Humor is a psychological state characterized by the positive emotion of amusement and the tendency to laugh," that "people of all ages and cultures experience humor," and that people use humor to, "cope with anxiety, embarrassment, grief, and physical pain." To understand humor though, one must have a cultural competency to make meaning and define the humor occurring in a particular culture (Tavory 2014, 275). Humor may also serve as a relief and a release of cultural tension (Poncela 2018, 96, and Bouwmeester 2013, 45). These theories are the foundation by which I will explain the humor I observed in memes over FB during my fieldwork.

Richard Dawkins (1976) developed the term meme and explains that they are replicators which possess the properties necessary for Darwinian evolution to occur, which Blackmore (2000, 66) claims influence our mind and culture. In 2003, Dawkins differentiated between his original definition of a meme and a digital meme by stating an internet meme is changed on purpose by people (Lukacs 2021, 61). Pishghadam et al. (2020, 18) propose that culture is a social behavior which produces language and shapes the thoughts of people within that culture's society. Like Reay (2015, 1243) states, "humor depends on cultural competencies," and this is necessary in finding the memes in chapter 4 humorous. Memes also play a role in identity performance and may give insight into ideals or values of the person who shared the meme (Prochazka 2018, 78). These points allow for an explanation of and understanding how the internet memes I show and describe in the next chapter not only formed individual's thoughts regarding the pandemic, but also their attitudes about and

actions during the pandemic, in particular the development from humor to conspiracy theories, to the protest which occurred over social media and in real life in the USA.

The Benign Violation Theory (BVT) is psychological theory which suggests something is funny when there is a violation, rather something that is, “contrary to expectations and threatens the person’s view of what the world ‘ought’ to be,” and the said violation is benign, or seen as safe (Kant and Norman 2019, 2). They further state that cultural differences can shape what a person finds humorous (Kant and Norman 2019, 1). Different ideas and beliefs between different cultures will therefore influence what is considered a violation and what is benign (Kant and Norman 2019, 3). The psychological distance one has to the joke or an event, such as the coronavirus, also plays a factor in whether the listener finds the joke humorous (Kant and Norman 2019, 4). The distance between the joke teller (the person who shared the meme on FB in the US) and the subject of the joke (coronavirus) and its location (early in the pandemic this was Europe and China) create a sense of “other.” As Brown (2020, 7) points out, early in the pandemic President trump referred to the coronavirus as “the China virus,” thus further creating a sense of otherness. These points regarding the BVT will be implemented in illustrating the memes presented in chapter 4 and allow for an understanding of why individuals were making jokes during a time of crisis.

## **3.2 Risk and Uncertainty**

Douglas’ (1992) work on risk exemplifies the observances I recorded during my fieldwork and will examine in chapter 4. Ideas she proposed in her book *Risk and Blame* eerily illustrate content observed during my fieldwork which was shared and discussed over social media, as well as actions taken as forms of protest defying stay at home orders. Her example of a doctor giving medical advice by way of scientific probability (Douglas 1992, 15) parallels current justifications for conspiracy theories and distrust in scientists by also making use of statistical probabilities regarding Covid-19. I will expand in greater detail on her theories of risk and uncertainty in the next chapter. She also states that the public do not view risk in the same way researchers do (Douglas 1992, 11). As stated in my introduction, her statement is true with regards to the pandemic and the public’s disregard for safety suggestions put forth by scientists. I will elaborate on this point more in chapter 4.

Risk can be summarized as weighing the probability that an unwanted outcome will occur if a certain action is carried out (Douglas 1992). This applies to risks I observed during fieldwork that people took such as not following safety guidelines, not wearing a mask, and refusing to respect social distancing requirements. Their actions can be understood in that they believed Covid-19 to be no more harmful than the flu and claimed that the average deaths from the flu were far greater than those from Covid-19. In this example people were using statistical probability to justify their risk taking.

Boholm (2003, 159-178) argues that there is a link between risk and culture and that decisions regarding what is a risk are culturally shaped, and how in mathematics risk is the statistical probability of an outcome. These points illustrate behaviors and posts shared on FB in the US illustrated in my research and analyzed in chapter 4. She further states that viewing something as a risk implies values and said risk may be negotiated or disputed (Boholm 2003, 161). In a recent paper by Brown (2020, 11) he pulls from Douglas' (1966) earlier work on ritual. He makes a connection between everyday practices as ritual and the materiality of objects like face masks and vaccines, both of which are major topics within my research in this paper (Brown 2020, 8-11).

Buchczyk (2020) writes about the uncertainty that immigrant women were facing with whom she worked in Bristol. She elaborates on how craft making conducted by these women, allowed for possibility during their time of uncertainty (Buchczyk, 2020). Utilizing her ethnographic account of this, I will draw parallels to some of my research participants, to make the claim that the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, forced them to also craft or find new ways to utilize their "craft." In this sense I refer to crafting as the making of a material object, such as the masks people sewed, donated, or sold during the pandemic, in addition to people's own "crafts" such as playing music, organizing, and running events, playing poker and cooking. This will be addressed further in chapter 4 of this paper.

### **3.3 Adaptation**

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced humans to adapt and readjust how they socially engage with other people. Self-isolation and quarantine prevented face-face interaction during many months of the pandemic. Because of this lack of social exchange, we were forced to

culturally adapt to the situation to maintain being social. Bennett (1976) points out that when coping with a problem, humans create a social future by adapting and in adapting we can realize goals and satisfy needs.

Mondada et al. (2020) state that social interaction is a foundation in human sociality and that the Covid-19 pandemic created a crisis whereby this need could not be met due to lockdowns. Social distancing and self-isolation implemented to prevent the spread of Covid-19, forced people to find alternative ways to remain social. In doing so, people adapted to this new normal, and created virtual spaces during lockdowns to maintain social interaction with friends and family. Mondada et al. (2020) following Goffman's (1963) theories on turn taking and participant framework, further write that haptic greetings such as hugs or handshakes, play an integral role in sociality, and illustrate how during lockdowns this necessary component of socialization was not possible. Once lockdowns were lifted and people were able to socialize in the physical presence of others, people were advised against utilizing haptic greetings in communication, to prevent physical contact to eliminate the possible transmission of Covid-19 to one another (Mondada et. Al 2020). In lieu of this, people adapted to achieve haptic greetings by means of elbow or foot bumps as opposed to close physical contact with their bodies or hands which are more likely to spread the virus during contact (Mondada et. Al 2020). This is but one example of how the pandemic affected socializing and people's adaptation to achieve a fundamental component of interaction.

## 4 Ethnographic chapters

In this chapter I will give an ethnographic account of what I observed during my fieldwork. As previously mentioned in my introduction, these topics include humor, conspiracy theories shared online, protests that took place in the USA against guidelines implemented by states both online and in real life, how people adapted while in self-isolation to socialize, how people and businesses adapted to the “new normal” once lockdowns were lifted, and the new businesses some individuals created which sprung from necessity and ingenuity. I will also discuss the uncertainty felt and expressed online.

### 4.1 The whole map is red

It was March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and Tromsø was covered in snow. I was still living in student housing. The students with whom I shared a kitchen, and I became very close in our first semester at UiT. From that original group, five of us remained this spring semester. Ironically, the night before, discussions were had about the coronavirus. Claims were made that it was just like the flu, and we should not be worried. We sat in our kitchen and watched episodes of Doomsday Preppers on YouTube. On this day I began filming for a camera exercise we were assigned in class. I recorded my friends cooking, chatting, and playing videogames. As I was filming, my friend Carlos exclaimed he was going to the supermarket before panic set in. The coronavirus had finally reached our isolated island in the arctic. I asked them on camera if they thought panic was going to set in. After everyone made jokes for the camera, another friend, Jesper, pulled out his cellphone and read from the Norwegian news. He read the headline, “our king says the country is in a serious crisis,” and showed me other articles stating we were in a crisis, and everything would be shutting down. We then looked at the world map showing where the coronavirus had reached thus far. The entire map was red, meaning the virus had reached everywhere. Carlos then showed a coronavirus world map from his phone. It showed 129,035 cases and 4,729 deaths thus far worldwide. China had just under 81,000 cases, while the USA, though high on the list, only had 1,339 placing them as the 7<sup>th</sup> highest country in the world with cases. In the ensuing weeks, this number would dramatically rise in the USA and at the time of my writing this, it still has the highest number of cases and deaths from Covid-19. Norway only had 688 cases and 0 deaths, so one can see



how the reality of the situation had not set in for us yet. Carlos exclaimed, “we were one of the lucky ones.” Though I was present in the room with my fellow students, I was recording what Pink et al. (2016:237) refer to as tactile digital ethnography. As discussed previously in chapter 2.2 this interacting with screens illustrates how the hand generates feelings (Pink et al. 2016) and can be seen when Carlos and Jesper are showing me what is on their phones in my film. In the film we see how they interact with their phones and the feelings that act generates comes through in their dialogues with me. When our conversation ended, I then ventured into a different kitchen and captured the thoughts and plans of other students and friends.

Four other students sat in this kitchen. Again, we discussed when we would go grocery shopping to stock up on goods for fear that stores would go empty. Some stated they were leaving for the mall then, while others were going to wait and see if things calmed down. After much discussion, I was convinced to go with them. To my surprise, the stores were calm. People shopped as if it was any other day. Shelves were fully stocked, including the most sought-after commodity in the US, toilet paper. We all purchased canned and dry goods just in case the stores were shut down and we would not be able to shop for some time. That never happened, even though the next day it was announced Norway was on lockdown. It would be another one to two weeks before lockdowns occurred in the US.

These encounters are shown in my master’s thesis film, *Pandemic Paradox*. The footage is somewhat of a happy accident. I did not initially pick up my camera on that day to record and discuss the pandemic, nor was the pandemic my thesis topic. I only sought to film scenes required for our class assignment. The topics discussed and ideas shared were recorded in real time as we were all getting new information on the coronavirus and this footage is our reaction to that information. This scene in the film serves not only as a time capsule, capturing our thoughts and reactions to the current situation, but takes viewers back to the early days of the pandemic and allows them to reflect on what it was like for them during that time.

## **4.2 Humor and Memes**

My research began by observing and recording memes on social media. When posting humorous memes about the pandemic, those individuals contributed to public discourse

surrounding their current state and their own attitudes regarding the pandemic, even if they had not been the original creator of the meme (Dynel 2020, 176). This sharing of memes was so prevalent, online news sites like Bored Panda (2020) began reporting on them. The sharing of these memes early on also illustrates the distance between the individual who shared it, and the reality of the coronavirus. This distance illustrates that the individual sharing the meme had not been affected by the coronavirus.

An example of this is of a post which I considered to be funny on FB on March 22. My post read, “I’m tired of seeing all these depressing coronavirus posts. Show me your quaran-tinis!” FB friends in the US began posting pictures of themselves drinking in the comments. Shortly thereafter I received a private message from my friend Hannah who was back in the states. She was appalled by my post and stated the pandemic was serious and not to be made light of with humor. I wrote an apology back to her and removed my post from social media, seeing as I offended her, and she is a dear friend. This instance illustrates two points from chapter 3.1. The first being my distance from the coronavirus compared to hers. At that moment we were in lockdown, and everything was closed here, but the number of cases in Tromsø were extremely low. The only effect the pandemic had on me at that time was being in self-isolation with my partner, and though we were scared, we quite enjoy each other’s company. Hannah’s distance to the coronavirus was much closer than my own. Her partner Paul was deathly sick, and she was panicked and scared. This can be seen in my film during my discussion with Hannah and Paul. Watching the film, you will notice I left the dates of her FB posts on the screenshots I edited into the film. They begin on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, two days before my ‘quaran-tini’ post. Throughout her posts she implores people to be safe, stay home, and gives detailed accounts of what she and Paul are going through. The BVT model can be used to explain how not only I, but those who commented with pictures of themselves drinking, or positive emojis, found my joke benign and were distanced in that moment from the real dangers of the coronavirus. Whereas Hannah had no distance from it,

she was living it, which explains her disdain for my post. Further examples can be seen in the memes below.



The image to the left is a meme I observed early in the pandemic. There is a picture taken from inside a refrigerator which contains a Corona beer on the far-right

side, while other items are huddled together on the far-left side, wrapped in a 3M PPE mask. Above the picture the caption reads, “Meanwhile, inside the fridge.” To understand this as humor one must make the connection of Corona beer and the coronavirus. During this period people were shortening the term coronavirus to “corona” and this meme is making a statement that inside the refrigerator, items are distancing from “corona,” just as people are distancing from each other due to the coronavirus. This is what Tavory (2014) refers to as “situation specific know-how.” To understand the joke, you must have knowledge of the pandemic and the suggestions made by the CDC like mask wearing and social distancing. This humor is also a form of irony as meaning is given to picture only with foreknowledge of Corona beer and the coronavirus. This foreknowledge allows the viewer to make the connection of “corona” and once made, the picture may be found humorous. The meme acts as a pun making a joke about distancing. Following the BVT, it illustrates not only the distance the joke teller has from the seriousness of the pandemic, but also a commentary on the authors thoughts regarding “corona” and social distancing.



Many connections that must be made to understand the next image. It is a meme of Joe Exotic, the Tiger King, petting a tiger cub with the words, “I guarantee ya, this corona virus started in that bitch Carole’s meat grinder.” First one must know who Joe Exotic and Carole [Baskin] are. This meme was made shortly after the Tiger King docu-series aired on Netflix in March 2020 which coincided with lockdowns in the USA. Having seen the docu-series one would know who these two characters are and their hostile relationship. You would also need to have seen the series to know she was accused by Joe of murdering her ex-husband and feeding him to the big cats she maintains in her wildlife preserve. One could also have foreknowledge of these individuals as what was shown in the series happened years earlier, so someone could be familiar with them if they had followed their stories years ago. This information is what Tavory (2014) refers to as “situation specific know-how.” Here, Joe Exotic is being used to make the joke. His claim that Carole’s meat grinder started the corona virus implies Carole used it to grind up her husband and from this or the feeding of him to her cats, the coronavirus was caused. The notion parallels early claims that people eating bats in Wuhan China is what caused the

coronavirus (Miles and Norman 2020). Again, one must know all these factors to understand the references imposed in the meme.



A third example is the next image. This is a cartoon meme of a dog sitting at a table with rolls of toilet-paper on top of it, in a room that is on fire. The words at the top read, “This is fine.” The meme references the

hoarding of toilet paper in the USA which occurred in March 2020. This is a revised version of the original webcomic by KC Green where the dog is sitting in a room surrounded by fire, a cup of coffee on the table and the words, “This is fine” (Bartley, 2020). The original meme has been shared on social media for some time and is meant to make the statement about mental health (Bartley, 2020). The humor in this revised version of the meme is meant to make fun of the toilet paper hoarders. To me, it is asking what good is hoarding toilet paper when chaos is ensuing from the pandemic and that their priorities are wrong.

This is an example of what Dynel (2020, 175-195) refers to as parody, in that this joke is imitating the original meme, only in this version a roll of toilet paper has been added to make the meme relevant to the time-period it was shared. It also serves as social commentary not only regarding mental health, but consumerism and the hoarding of toilet paper which occurred early in the pandemic. Kirk and Rifkin (2021, 125) explain that the extreme buying and hoarding of toilet paper between February and March of 2020 was a compulsive behavior and a reaction to the perceived threat of the coronavirus, stay at home orders, and fear. The parody displayed in Green’s meme exemplifies these actions by providing social commentary on these issues.

The last meme I wish to discuss further illustrates how one must have a cultural competence to make meaning from a joke (Tavory 2014, 275) and how jokes may potentially have negative consequences. The Figure below is a picture of a bat holding a sign which reads, “Eat mor chikin, chick-fil-a.” It is a play on advertisements the US fast food chain Chick-fil-a uses, which typically have a cow holding a sign that reads, “Eat mor chikin.” To make



this connection you would have to know of Chick-fil-a and have seen their advertisements such as a commercial or billboard. Chick-fil-a has establishments in the US, South Africa, Canada, and the U.K. (Wikipedia 2021). When I took this screenshot in March 2020, news outlets had informed the public that the cause of the coronavirus was most likely an infected bat in Wuhan, China which infected another animal which was then eaten by someone, and this is how the pandemic began (Miles and Norman 2020). With this knowledge one can make the connection of the infected bat scenario and Chick-fil-a ads. The bat is stating eat more chicken just as the cows do in the ads. This joke can be interpreted using Bouwmeester's (2013, 42) example of putdown humor according to superiority theory of humor, in that the motive behind the joke may be to make oneself (joke teller) feel superior to another (people in China). Bouwmeester (2013, 45) also states that humor theory requires something taboo or unacceptable to be found humorous. The bat meme is just that. It suggests the eating of a bat which may be normal in one culture but taboo in another. If these connections are made there is potential for the meme to be used as what Salcudean (2020, 94) refers to as a "rhetorical weapon" which may, "incite hatred and discrimination." There is potential for this meme to incite hostility towards Asians by insinuating the coronavirus is a Chinese problem, one which they should be held accountable for. Discrimination towards Asians rose worldwide since the beginning of the pandemic and by the end of April 2020 there were 1,500 cases of discrimination, racism, and violence towards Asians and Asian-Americans in the US alone (Human Rights Watch 2020).

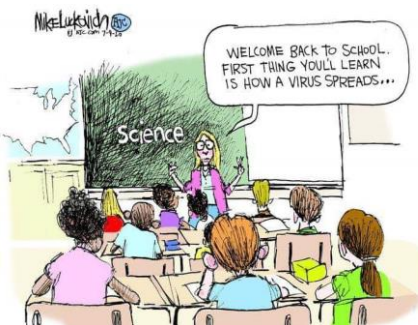
This joke also creates a sense of otherness such as 'we' are free of the coronavirus which is affecting 'them'. Swinkels and Koning (2016, 8) write that "humor may provide insight in local norms... and allow us to understand power relations." The author of this meme may be doing that by making commentary about another culture and expressing some form of opinion about them and the coronavirus. A sense of otherness was further instilled in public discourse by President Trump by referring to the coronavirus as the "China Virus" (Brown 2020, 7). This joke may also be viewed as harassment as Smith (2009, 162) explains in her paper on 'unlaughter' since it is one-sided and meant as a putdown of a different culture. People also used humor as a tool for social commentary on the reopening of schools in the US and as a rebuttal to all the conspiracy theory posts online. These are illustrated in the following figures.



In the image to the left, a person is shopping during the pandemic while taking the proper precautions by wearing a mask. The items shelved under the sign, “Back-To-School Sale,” are commentary on what opening the schools up during a pandemic will look like compared to a pre-pandemic school year. On the left are the regular items needed for school and on the right are items necessary for the safety of the children during in class attendance. This commentary meant to be humorous is also a political statement because it exaggerates normal expectations of what children need for school.



This next image is also a statement on the safety of school children. The image is from the US version of the television show *The Office*. In it a character Dwight wears a hazmat suit and is speaking into a megaphone. This meme is updated for pandemic times by the adding of text which reads, “Hope you had a nice summer. Welcome to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, everything is fine.” In this instance again, the meme is meant to be humorous but also puts forth an exaggeration of what in class attendance could be like for children during the pandemic. It is a commentary against the reopening of schools and shows this through irony.



This last image makes a statement about conspiracy theorists during the pandemic. It is a cartoon of which children are attending class as they normally would, unlike in the previous two memes. In the cartoon the chalkboard reads “science,” and the teacher states they will be learning about how a virus spreads. This is a reference to the to many memes and the discourse which flooded social media, of which people argued against scientists in which people claimed the scientists were wrong, Covid-19 was just the flu, masks do not work, and the country should open again. People used the term “covidiot” to refer to these people. Though a cartoon, humor can be found in the irony.

As a US citizen familiar with these US pop culture references, I was able to make the connections in these memes immediately, because of my cultural competence. I understood the local context of the memes and cultural references, whereas someone from a different country not familiar with these references may not understand them or interpret them as

humorous. Cultural knowledge was necessary to understand all four memes, as was distance from the joke and its subject. Those personally affected by Covid-19 found the jokes in bad taste due to their closeness to the virus, like my friend Hannah, whereas people with greater distance from it found them humorous. Jokes may be used as means of coping with uncertainty as described by relief theory (Bouwmeester 2013, 41) and perhaps that is why people were sharing them during a time of crisis. All four of these memes follow a joke pattern as described by Douglas (1968, 365) whereby they all share two things in common; an image which is a cultural icon, and text. Granted when Douglas referred to joke patterns in 1968 internet memes did not yet exist, but this idea is relevant in explaining them today. These memes are also exemplifying of Douglas' (1968, 366) view that jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur. It has been over a year since the pandemic began yet I still see jokes regarding the pandemic and Covid-19 on my social media feed today.

### 4.3 Conspiracy theories

“When closure on the boundaries turns the community in on itself,  
we find ourselves in a conspiracy- minded, self-destructive atmosphere.”

Mary Douglas, 1992 from *Risk and Blame*

The above quote from Mary Douglas exemplifies what I observed and recorded on FB during my fieldwork in that what I observed on social media was a community divided and the spreading of conspiracy theories. As distance to the pandemic grew closer to some individuals, they used Facebook to express their views regarding the virus and in some instances, this came in the form of posts and memes regarding what some refer to as conspiracy theories and I will illustrate them in the figures below. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009, 205) regard conspiracy theories (CT) as, “an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished). Examples of CT include ideas that the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, was orchestrated by the US government and not Osama Bin Laden, that John F. Kennedy was assassinated by the CIA, or that the Sandy Hook massacre was a hoax (Miller et al. 2016, 824). Miller et al. (2016, 825)



further state that sharing or belief in CTs, “serves both ideological and psychological needs.” The common idea shared by these theories is that a person or entity in a position of power carried out a devastating act, but allowed blame to fall upon someone else, thereby allowing them to get away with the devastating act, unbeknownst to the public. Sometimes ideas considered to by CTs are proven to be true. Sunstein and Vermeule (2009, 206) use the examples of the Watergate hotel room which we now know was bugged by Republican officials and the MKULTRA program in which the CIA did administer LSD to individuals to investigate mind control.

The pandemic we are currently in is no exception and many conspiracy theories have been shared over social media regarding where the novel coronavirus originated, what is “really” causing the illness, who to blame for the virus, and even that the virus was a hoax (Chêne et al. 2020, 34). Some CTs about the pandemic go so far as to reference MKULTRA and other government programs like the Tuskegee experiments to prove that the government is capable and has committed atrocities to its own people before. In the below figures I will show some conspiracy theories I observed on FB and explain the thoughts surrounding them in addition to the dangers of sharing such content. These false ideas were shared so frequently, that FB and other social media sites began fact checking individual posts regarding Covid-19 and the pandemic to block (though some would claim censor the truth) the spread of potentially harmful misinformation (Chêne et al. 2020, 32).



The first CT I wish to discuss is from a post shared on FB that links to a news article from mid-March 2020, which suggests the coronavirus came from a lab in Wuhan, China. Many other forms of this CT were shared but the common theme was that governments around the globe, in particular China where the virus originated, were lying to the public on the virus' origins and in fact it somehow escaped from this laboratory which was conducting testing on coronaviruses (Baier and Re 2020). Miller et al. (2016, 825) state that believing in a CT gives us closure and a sense of





control or certainty in an otherwise uncertain situation. Conspiracy theories on the origins of the virus do just that. In this example, having a definitive starting point for the virus provides a sense of relief and eases the uncertainty surrounding thoughts of how it came to be. Furthermore, this CT places the blame on a physical institution, the laboratory, but then insinuates that either human error or malicious intent by world leaders, caused the pandemic for their own reasons. The sharing of this CT is what Miller et al. (2016, 827) explain as endorsing the CT and this endorsement is a means of motivated reasoning. Though Sunstein and Vermeule (2009, 204) argue that people accept CTs when their civil rights are infringed upon or when they lack informational sources. Both stand true in the instance of pandemic CTs. In this example, the informational source is not a reputable news outlet. Additionally, users of FB tend to socialize in communities with shared interests which not only reinforces their own ideas, segregates them from outside ideas, and fosters confirmation bias (Vicario et al. 2016, 558) This means, the flow of information one receives via FB is limited and therefore supports the claim made by Sunstein and Vermeule. The idea of the virus being manufactured in a laboratory further fueled the CTs when the US President claimed he could prove it came from a lab in China, as seen in the image to the right.

These figures illustrate how confirmation bias occurs. We have the first example of someone spreading speculative information that the coronavirus originated in a laboratory via FB from a questionable source, followed by President Trump claiming he has evidence of this on a more reputable news source. Though my FB feed was flooded with these posts at one time, people moved on to attacking others with even more conspiracy theories. The brunt end of these attacks online was aimed at Bill Gates and is illustrated in the next image.



During this time, Bill Gates was compared to the teen slasher Freddy Kruger as shown in figure. Claims were made he perpetrated this whole pandemic to sell a vaccine for it, was said to have knowledge of this pandemic two years beforehand, and even had the sign in front of his foundation stated as reading, “The Center for Human Population Control” (shown in thesis film). Blaming Bill Gates for the pandemic follows the definition of a CT put forth by Sunstein and Vermeule (2009, 205) in that blame is put on a powerful individual attempting to conceal his role in the conspiracy. This idea is

furthered by Shermer (2010, 102) when he suggests that a conspirator attempts control over a nation or people. This becomes apparent when viewing the memes about Bill Gates in the examples above and in my thesis film. Bill Gates was not the only person in a position of power who was accused of ill intent and orchestrating the pandemic cover up. Dr. Anthony Fauci is another individual who was attacked over the internet and claims were made he was behind the pandemic.

Not long into the pandemic a “documentary” was shared to YouTube titled *Plandemic*. People shared the YouTube link on Facebook with posts like, “OMG everyone needs to watch this!” In the short film a discredited doctor makes accusations against Dr. Fauci. People spread this film across the internet and even countries like Russia planned to play it over their news broadcasts.

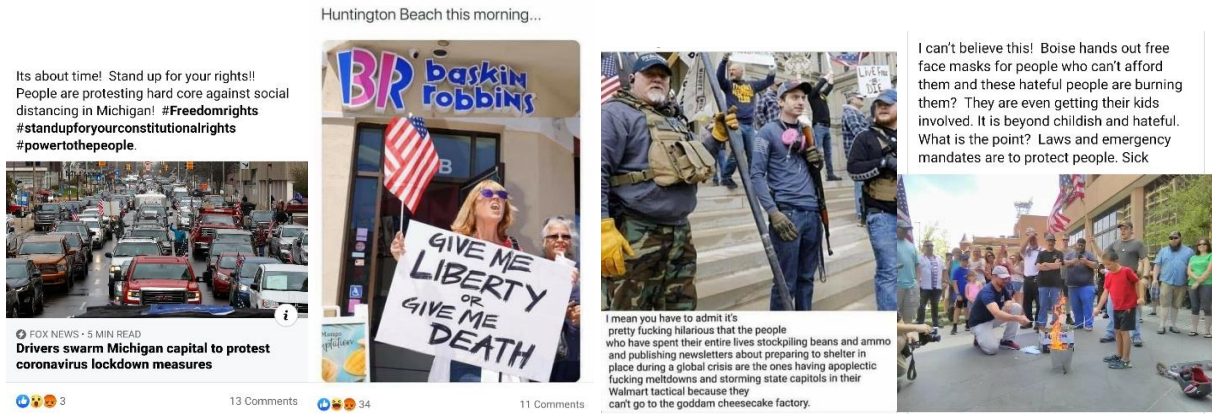
Virologist Judy Mikovits, the doctor interviewed in the film, claimed to have worked with Fauci on HIV/AIDS research and that he aided in a cover-up which led to her firing and imprisonment when she attempted to blow the whistle on Fauci’s negligence that caused the deaths of millions infected with HIV or AIDS (Enserink and Cohen 2020). In the film she also makes claims that the wearing of facemasks activates the coronavirus and that SARS-Cov-2, which causes Covid-19, was created in laboratories both in the US and Wuhan, China (Plandemic 2020). These claims were analyzed and debunked in an article published in Science Magazine (2020). During the meme sequence early in my film, I use screenshots of posts that were shared about *Plandemic* as a sub narrative in the sequence. I do this to show the spread of misinformation online during the early part of the pandemic, and people’s uncertainty regarding the coronavirus and its origin. The film furthers the ideas Miller et al. (2016, 826) regarding confirmation bias because claims made in *Plandemic* endorsed ideas of conspiracy already floating social media. This sub narrative is intertwined with another sub narrative regarding the doctors who stated they have a cure for Covid-19, who were also endorsed by President Trump.

As shown in my movie, doctors in white lab coats stood in front of the press, claiming to have the cure for Covid-19, which was hydroxychloroquine. Their story was shared across Facebook and quickly turned into memes making fun of them. One of the doctors came under fire when it was discovered she had made claims about alien DNA and demon sperm. Articles were quickly published to fact check their statements and one from Pop Sci states that hydroxychloroquine is ineffective at treating Covid-19 (Chodosh and Maldarelli 2020). Just

like the previous memes, the spreading of *Plandemic* and stories backing these doctors spread across FB and had consequences. These ideas gave credence to the CTs which came before them and solidified beliefs that the pandemic was a conspiracy in that we were all lied to (*Plandemic*) and there was a cure, but the government will not investigate using it as despite the doctors claims that it cures Covid-19. CTs were so prevalent at this time that the WHO claimed the to be an “infodemic” because there was so much information being spread online, by news outlets, and public officials, and people did not know what to believe (Chêne et al. 2020, 33). The denial of the pandemic and belief in the conspiracy theories had deadly consequences for some. In my film I use the example of Herman Cain in the meme sequence showing tweets he made saying he would not wear a mask at a convention, then catching Covid-19 and dying from the virus. News articles like the New York Post (April 21, 2020) shared similar stories, one instance is of a 60-year-old man from Ohio who publicly claimed the coronavirus was a “political ploy,” called for the reopening of bars, then died from Covid-19. With all the chaos and uncertainty that the pandemic caused, and the misleading information on social media sites, it is understandable how some may choose to believe and share conspiracy theories. As Sunstein and Vermeule (2009, 205) explain, a conspiracy theory usually has a person or institution in a position of power as the orchestrator of the conspiracy. When the Daily Mail (2020) publishes an article on how large public companies were given payroll protection loans by the US government, which was supposed to help small businesses pay their employees during lockdowns, it is understandable how the public feels cheated and taken advantage of by those in power, thereby making the belief in a CT easier for them.

#### **4.4 Protest**

The Protests I observed in the US during fieldwork took two forms. The first form I will refer to as perceived injustice which occurred in real life, out on the streets. Individuals taking part in this protest did so in defiance of stay-at-home orders, against the closure of businesses, and the refusal of wearing masks. The second form of protest occurred in digital media. People shared pictures, news articles, and memes in support of those protesting in the street, thereby expressing their own views of these perceived injustices. Protests ranged from small gatherings of people to enormous crowds, sometimes armed with guns. The images below illustrate both forms of protest.



These images demonstrate the protesting of stay-at-home orders. The people in the images are the protesters taking to the streets, while the people who shared the pictures are illustrating online protest. The online protest is two sided though. Some shared these images and others like them, in support of the protesters as you can see in first and last images. Reading their comments, you can see their support of the protesting of the lockdowns. Others shared images to protest the protesters. This is evident in the comments above and below the middle two images. Here the individuals who shared the images clearly state their opposition to those in the images protesting. In the first image, protesters blocked traffic and jammed up streets with their vehicles in front of the capital building in Michigan (O'Reilly 2020). They were demanding the reopening of the economy which is ironic because at that time Michigan was reported as having the fourth highest number of Covid-19 cases in the country (O'Reilly 2020). The day was referred to as "Operation gridlock," and plans of protest were spread across social media platforms to rally protests across the country (Kenton 2020).



The figures above are examples of online protest. All three make statements on the way the US handled the pandemic. The first and third images are commentary regarding the closure of

businesses and spaces during lockdowns. The first image infers the government is suspending the rights of individuals by forcing them to stay home and close down businesses. The third image questions why the government allowed some institutions and businesses to remain open, while others were closed for safety reasons. In this example the meme exaggerates this point by stating a crowded Walmart is ok to shop in, yet one cannot camp in the woods, isolated while isolated from others. The middle image is a commentary on the stimulus checks were to be sent to every US citizen to provide financial aid during the pandemic. It makes a statement how in Canada, the daughter received financial benefits from the government in two days, whereas in the states, many did not receive aid in the form of unemployment benefits or a stimulus check for many months. Questions like these further sentiments expressed in CTs and in turn reinforce confirmation bias as explained by Miller et al. (2016, 826). Situations like this make people feel powerless and search for meaning and rationalize these chaotic events (Strum and Albrecht 2020).

## **4.5 Adaptation**

This section discusses the other aspect of my fieldwork which is how people adapted to lifestyle changes during the pandemic. I write about how Covid-19 effected Hannah and Paul when Paul contracted Covid-19, and go into the crafts I previously mentioned, like Louie creating a new business and how Shelly did the same by making masks. Further, I will discuss the use of Zoom in people's lives to stay social with one another, and how other aspects of the internet were utilized similarly.

As lockdown and uncertainty were looming on the horizon in early March of 2020, my original fieldwork did not seem feasible, my classmates and I were told to adapt and find a new thesis topic. We needed a thesis which we could work on remotely, as travel was not possible, and one that did not involve interaction with participants in real life since we would be in lockdown for the unforeseeable future. Suggestions were made to us on how to carry out fieldwork remotely. This is how my project began, me adapting my thesis to the pandemic. In the same way that the pandemic forced me to adapt, it also steered adaptation in other ways. This became apparent to me over social media when I witnessed friends and family back home sharing posts of the ways they were adapting to this “new normal.”

## **Louie**

The Covid-19 pandemic immediately altered human interaction globally (Kirk and Rifkin 2021, 128). Stay at home orders were issued thereby preventing the daily interactions we are accustomed to like dining out, going to bars, jogging down the beach, etc. In lieu of this, giant online home delivery businesses like Amazon made tremendous profits from the pandemic due to government mandated restrictions such as stay at home orders (Owens 2021). People across the world were in lockdown and many were unable to go out for necessities like food or supplies, so people turned to the internet to order goods thus allowing ecommerce sites to continue making earnings. Huge corporations were not the only entities to profit during these trying times though. Individuals were able to adapt and create new business as well. The first instance of this that I noticed came from a post my friend Louie in Chicago shared. Louie owns and operates his own business that provides the staffing and beverage needs for music festivals. He also runs a bar and brewery that serves as a concert venue. Neither of these businesses could function during the pandemic due to lockdowns. In our Zoom interview he described the situation as devastating to his industry and livelihood. Louie quickly thought of a new business venture with some associates. Together they built a drive-in movie theater. People could come and see films there in the safety of their own car. The first post on FB was elusive. It read, “Big things happening. Stay tuned.” As the project came together more fully, they started sharing posts about their drive-in and news articles written about their new venture. The buzz created online via posts on social media and news articles about the drive-in was their initial marketing. This online self-promotion, and the sharing of it by FB friends enabled them to sell out of tickets for the first film showing. The months went on and lockdowns were implemented and then lifted. The whole time though, the drive-in was able to operate creating a lucrative new business, one that survived the pandemic when so many others did not.

It was the pandemic itself which allowed for this drive-in to be successful. Due to restrictions, many major movie theaters in the US closed (Hoover 2020). They did not survive the initial shutdowns. Some closed their doors as ordered by state government, but then reopened with restrictions such as social distancing within the theater and in waiting lines, the mandatory wearing of masks, and a limited number of patrons allowed inside at any given time. The drive-in had been a thing of the past, but because of a need supplied by the

pandemic that it not only lives on but is successful (Whitten 2020). It provided a way for people to safely leave their homes and do something social after months of self-isolation and uncertainty. The drive-in theater was not the only business adaptation I observed.

## **Shelly**

Shelly was visiting family out of state when the lockdowns occurred in the USA. Unable to travel home she remained there for three weeks longer than originally planned. It was during this time that media outlets were sharing news of hospitals filling up with Covid patients and front-line workers, specifically doctors and nurses, were in dire need of personal protective equipment (PPE), like masks and were looking for donations of PPE equipment . Shelly has a degree in fashion design and is knowledgeable in textiles and upon seeing this news she decided to help in the fight against Covid by sewing cloth PPE masks and safely donating them to a nearby hospital. Materials needed to make the masks were bought online and delivered to the home. She also shared posts giving advice to others on how to make masks themselves, some even containing step by step instructions. The posts served as an open forum for people to ask questions and receive answers from her. Posts of this nature were shared across my social media. Simultaneously, I began to see news articles on social media stating others across the US were also making PPE masks and donating them to their local hospitals that were running low. Shelly continued to make and donate masks while in isolation with family. What began to stay busy and help hospitals during the lockdowns, turned into a business once Shelly was safely able to travel home.

With shutdowns in place, people required to remain in self-isolation, and travel bans, many lost their jobs, especially those in the service industry and those who worked directly on people such as estheticians or tattoo artists. Forced to cease working due to restrictions, Shelly created a new business which came about from the conditions created by the pandemic. People in the US were allowed out of self-isolation for essential needs, like shopping at the grocery store or other stores deemed essential by the government such as Target and Walmart. To do so safely, a mask mandate was implemented in some states. The state where Shelly lives was one such state. Due to these circumstances, Shelly was able to create a new business, that of sewing cloth PPE masks and selling them over the internet on Etsy. Shelly



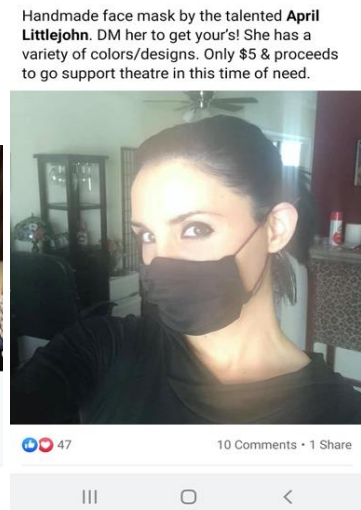
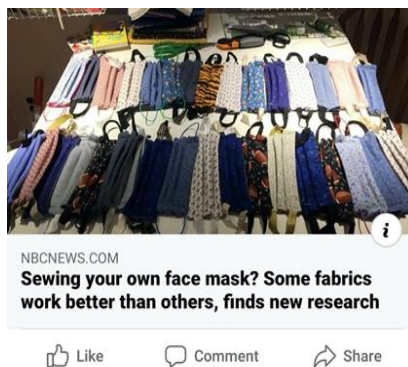
used social media to advertise this business, and the internet for customers to make online purchases. Shelly now has a website to sell products which are not just masks any longer. Bowties, hotel, and tote bags are also for sale. All are made in different designs, which change periodically as Shelly purchases new materials to create new designs. What began to pass time during lockdown and assist hospital staff in their dire time of need, turned into a new business for Shelly, one still operating after one year of a pandemic.



40 more #masks will be ready to go on Saturday at 2pm! Set your alarms!! 🚨🚨🚨  
follow me at: @little\_x\_queen  
[www.littlequeenchicago.com](http://www.littlequeenchicago.com)



Shelly was not the only individual I observed creating and selling masks online. People I am friends with on FB also posted themselves selling masks or shared articles or links to others who were doing the same. Different designs and styles of masks were being sold. Some even catered to horror fans. A post was shared that the famous special effects makeup artist Tom Savini created a PPE mask in the style of the hockey mask worn by Jason Voorhies in the Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> film series.





Even though I observed many individuals selling masks they made (the above images), there was no shortage of buyers as many were required to wear masks while working, such as waitstaff in restaurants, while others had to wear masks when going out. This is exemplified in my film through conversations with my mom when she explains safety precautions they had to take going out in Illinois, and at the end of the film during the last sequence of shots set to “What a Wonderful World,” recorded by Joey Ramone.

## **Hannah and Paul**

On March 14, 2020, Paul fell ill. At this time there were roughly 2,800 cases of coronavirus in the US, so he did not think he had it. He believed it to be the flu, and the pandemic was not a reality for them yet. Not thinking it was serious, he and his partner Hannah went to the market for supplies and were “flabbergasted” at what they encountered. People were in gas masks and pushing and shoving each other. This was the time when shelves in stores were vacant of toilet paper and sanitary wipes. They bought supplies in preparation of having to stay in their homes for what they thought would only be around two weeks. Doctors were dismissive of his condition and sent him home twice. When he began to feel better his fever would come back worse than before. He was finally admitted to the hospital for dehydration. A chest X-ray showed he did not have pneumonia, so he was sent home again. When he grew further ill, Hannah brought him back to the hospital and demanded he be admitted. After five days tests showed he did in fact have pneumonia and Covid-19. Paul and Hannah tell this story in my thesis film. I retell it here to illustrate how unprepared not only they were, but hospital staff was as well. As Paul recollects in my film, doctors were very dismissive of him having Covid because he had not been traveling. Hannah used FB to update people on Paul’s condition and plead with her followers to stay inside and follow safety protocols suggested by the CDC and local government. This provided first-hand information warning of the dangers of Covid-19 to those who saw her posts and, in many instances, this information was shared by others on their FB feed. As Thelwall and Thelwall (2020) write, quick access to first-hand information during a crisis is crucial and Hannah’s use of FB to do so allowed for access of this information to spread quickly and reach a wide audience by others sharing Paul’s situation as well. I utilized some of these posts in my film to show the audience what it was really like for her in those days. The posts serve as a

freeze-frame of her thoughts and emotions and give more insight into their reality at that time, then the recollection of their story ever could.

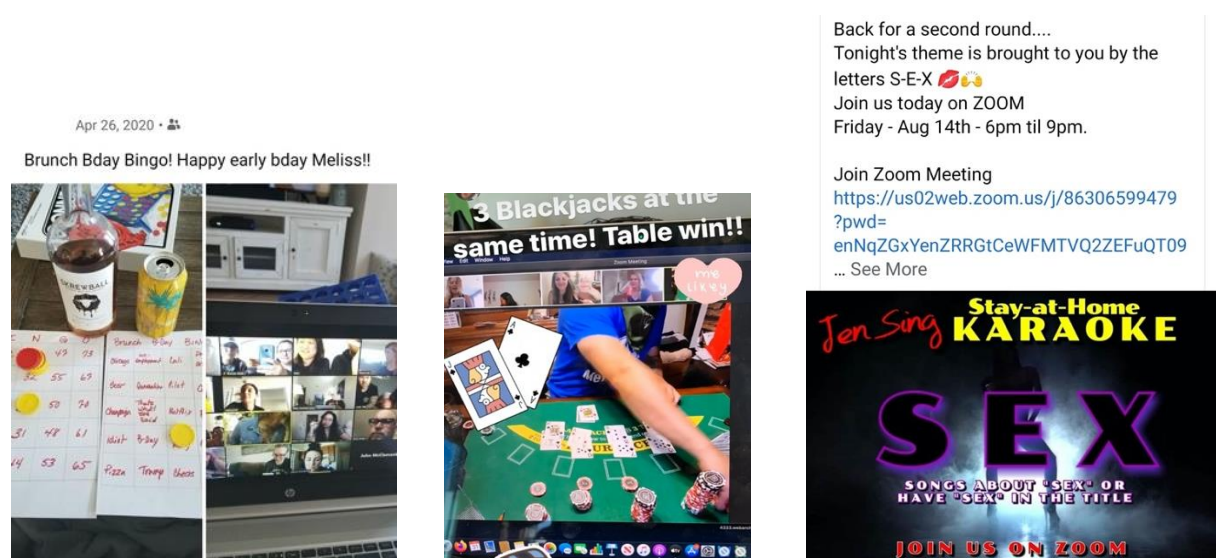
This brush with death dramatically changed their lives. They both adapted to the pandemic differently than others I have written about in this paper. Because their situation was so severe, they were not willing to take any risks once Paul was healed. In our Zoom conversation in late August 2020, Paul told me he had only left the house six times since he became sick March 14. Two times they went to get Covid tests and came right back home and four times Hannah went shopping for food and household necessities. During the six months at home, especially during March and April, Hannah took to FB asking friends to shop for them, which many did. She messaged them her shopping list, then sent them money to shop via PayPal or Venmo, which is another cash app in the US. It was not until March of 2021 that Paul left the house to simply venture outside. In that instance, he and Hannah went for a walk in their neighborhood. Prior to this exodus from the home, he and Hannah adapted to be social with friends in creative ways. The first was like others I have written about in this paper. They attended Zoom hangouts with friends online. Like Kirk and Rifkin (2021, 126) write, many were feeling, “Zoom fatigue.” They explain this is due to paying increased attention to faces over Zoom to interpret nonverbal cues which otherwise are apparent during in person conversation (Kirk and Rifkin 2021, 126). To combat this, they arranged safe hangouts with friends at their apartment, where friends would converse with them from outside the apartment window, while they sat on their balcony a floor above the ground. Sometimes friends would bring takeout food to them, and they would have a socially distanced dinner, one with a wall and window between the two parties. Hannah admits that taking these precautions may seem paranoid, but neither her or Paul are willing to risk their safety or the safety of others during this pandemic.

Their lifestyle adaptation is centered around risk. In our conversation Hannah said, “Every time you leave your apartment, you have to ask yourself, is the risk worth it, because the risk is always there. Even if you’re wearing gloves. Even if you’re wearing a mask. It’s not one hundred percent [effective]. So yeah, you have to ask yourself, ‘Is it worth it?’ And not only for yourself, but also is it worth it to spread it [Covid-19] to another person unknowingly? And to me it’s not worth it.” This sentiment is vastly different than what I illustrated in posts I in this paper shared regarding protesters or conspiracy theorists. Hannah embodies an individual showing concern and compassion for others, whereas many people in

the US can be viewed as selfish and uncaring by the actions they took by refusing to follow safety regulations which were implemented to stop the spread of Covid-19.

## Staying social during lockdowns

Other forms of adaptation took place during lockdowns. I observed and participated in some of these which took place online on a poker site, in newly formed Facebook groups, and over Zoom. Pictures of such activities were shared on social media, like “brunch bingo,” “Zoom blackjack,” and “Zoom karaoke.” (figures )



These images illustrate people adapted during lockdowns to stay social with friends. One of the first virtual spaces I participated in was a FB group titled, “The Quarantined Home Chef.” I was invited to the group over FB by a high school friend of mine. The creator of the group is the head chef in a Texas barbeque restaurant. He wanted to make a virtual space for people to post pictures of food they cooked and dishes they created. In the comment section under the pictures, people asked for recipes of the shared dish, complimented the person who shared it, and carried on dialogues about cooking. It appeared to be an escape from the reality of the pandemic. Though we were locked in our homes, across the globe, we shared a commonality in cooking. I shared pictures of dishes I created, and one was even chosen to be the cover picture for the group’s FB page one day. It has been over a year since the group was

created and I still enjoy scrolling through my FB feed and seeing the delicious dishes group members share.

Another virtual space which I observed was an online poker site, which for legal reason will remain unnamed. It was created in March of 2020 after lockdowns were initiated in Canada and the US. It was not until early April that another friend of mine invited me to participate in this group. Though simple in nature, this group had more complexity. Online gambling is illegal in many states in the USA, though online poker sites allow you to play games and bet with play chips. On these sites you may buy play chips with a credit or debit card, though they allow you to collect free chips every certain number of hours. To combat the illegality of online gaming in certain countries, the creator of this virtual community devised a different strategy. They hosted six poker tournaments on the online gaming site each Saturday. Each tournament cost the player a certain number of play chips, known as a 'buy-in.' The winners of the tournament were then paid in play chips through the game. To raise the stakes, the creator invented a way for real money to be a stake. You could buy-in to a tournament with play chips, but then you would have to send the creator real money for your buy-in. They would then send money to the winners of each tournament. This exchange took place using online payment platforms. During tournament play, identities are concealed by use of an avatar. Players can communicate with each other during play though via a chat option. Many of the participants work in the poker industry. During the lockdown's casinos were closed and tournaments were suspended. This virtual space allowed for these individuals to not only gamble but remain in touch with each other during self-isolation. There were 36 members in the group when I was invited to join in April 2020. There are currently close to 200 members, though not all play in every tournament. The demand to play increased so much that the creator hosts tournaments every night of the week and now collects money from each of the tournaments, which is referred to as a 'rake.' This virtual space illustrates another creative way people adapted during lockdowns to engage with each other.

Like the online poker community created in March of 2020, other participants utilized Zoom to play blackjack with each other. The main individual would set up a blackjack card table and set poker chips where a person would be sitting. This individual acted as the dealer. Others who engaged were the players and betting took place in order of their seats. If there were five players, each would be assigned a seat number, in this example seats are 1-5. The dealer would then ask over Zoom how much seat one wanted to bet, and he would place that amount in chips, as a player would playing blackjack in person at a casino. The dealer would

do the same for seat two through 5. Once all bets were placed, he would deal the cards. Play would follow in order again as players could 'hit' or 'stay.' Once all players made their decisions to stay or hit, the dealer would show his cards and hit, if necessary, as is the normal rule in blackjack. Once the hand finished the dealer would pay winners chips to the vacant seats in front of him or collect chips from any losers. Those attending this virtual space typically drank alcohol at home while playing. Zoom allowed all participants to see and engage with each other from across the USA.

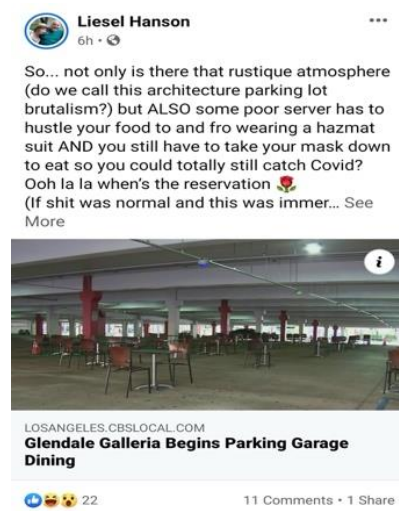
The final virtual space I observed during fieldwork was referred to as online karaoke. Jen, the organizer of this space, works as a karaoke host at a bar in Los Angeles, CA. When lockdowns occurred, the bar she worked at closed. Through the use of FB, she discovered there was still a demand for karaoke and created a way for people to carry this out, utilizing Zoom. As seen in figure , Jen would post links to the Zoom karaoke on FB. People simply had to join the Zoom meeting via the shared link, and they were now able to sing karaoke with others from the comfort of their own home. It is common for people to give a tip to the karaoke host when participating at a bar and this space is no different. Jen accepts tips via online payment platforms. While observing their group, was asked to sing when I was observing them, but could not because it was 12:00 AM in Los Angeles and 9:00 AM here in Tromsø and my partner was asleep. The virtual karaoke bar created by Jen gave the participants an opportunity be social with each other in familiar way. Though internet sometimes lagged, and distractions occurred off camera, everyone enjoyed participating. Though some bars have reopened in Los Angeles, Jen is still hosting Zoom karaoke each weekend and every night there is a different theme of songs one should choose from to sing.

Adapting to maintain sociality was not just for adults. Parents came up with a creative way for their children to stay in contact with friends, when schools were closed, and stay-at-home orders were in effect. Due to the lockdowns, most schools utilized Zoom in lieu of in person classes. At the same time, many individuals were working from home. This meant parents and their children were home together all day, as opposed to the children being in school and the parents being at their place of work during the day. Posts were shared illustrating the stress parents felt and done so in humorous ways. To combat the fact children could not see their friends, parents arranged birthday parades. Children would make signs for their friend then parents would collectively drive passed the home of the child whose birthday it was honking their car horns, shouting from their cars, and displaying the birthday signs children made, as the birthday child stood outside with their parents. This allowed the

children to interact, be it from a distance, with their classmates and friends while in lockdown. (Williams 2020). This ingenuity gave hope for people that there was still some aspect of sociality that could be achieved during this time of uncertainty.

## Adapting after lockdowns

Adaptation to the pandemic could be seen out in public too. Some examples were mentioned before, such as the Chicago Drive-In Theater and the wearing of masks in public, though other forms of creative adaptation took place for people to be social safely, according to required guidelines. One such example is outdoor dining. I began to see posts that restaurants were not allowed to have guests indoors due to safety concerns, and in turn, some restaurants made outdoor seating for customers. An example of this is shown at the end of my film and here in figure



Glendale galleria, located in Glendale, CA, is a large open air shopping mall. It was closed in March of 2020 due to the coronavirus, reopened in May, but then closed again by order of the CA governor (CBSLA 2020). In July 2020, to make some income, restaurants at the mall opened for delivery and curbside pick-up. It was during this time that the galleria got creative and setup an outdoor dining area in the parking garage, which allowed patrons to sit while socially distanced, when picking up take-out (CBSLA 2020).

There were other ways in which people adapted to dine out. In conversations with my friends and family, and from seeing their posts on social media, I learned that not only did restaurant staff have to wear masks. During the pandemic, once restaurants were able to have diners, guests had to follow certain guidelines. They had to have masks on when entering the restaurant and walking through it. Masks could be removed to eat and drink though. There could be parties no larger than groups of six people, and they had to be seated three feet apart from one another. When I asked my mom why to go through all that trouble and risk

endangering herself, she said, “At this point what are you gonna do? Stay in? I can’t stay in all the time.” This is an example of Anderson’s (1968) notion that during a disaster or crisis, people tend to normalize the situation. My mom assuming risk by going out during this crisis, though taking precautions, which seemed irrational to me were normalized by her subjectivity of her situation. I observed other people posting similar behavior on social media during this time.



Friends of mine were going to breweries in Los Angeles, CA and posting pictures of themselves wearing masks, as the wearing of masks while in public was mandatory. The wearing of masks while being in public at a brewery in the picture demonstrates that they were following safety guidelines, infers they had knowledge of why there were those guidelines (danger of Covid-19) but chose to be out in public anyway, thereby assuming the risk of infection. Taking

risks like this out in public during a pandemic illustrate the idea of timespan during a crisis (Douglas 1992). The pandemic had been going on for months, and some people were feeling what Kirk and Rifkin (2020) refer to as “Zoom fatigue.” Being social solely in virtual spaces was not sufficient any longer, time had passed since the pandemic began, and some were willing to risk being in public to have face to face interpersonal communication.

This chapter has served to illustrate adaptation to the pandemic which was observed during my fieldwork. The need for interactions (Baumeister and Leary 1995) drove adaptations during lockdowns in the form of creating virtual spaces to remain social. Some these spaces included gambling, karaoke, and hanging out while drinking with friends. The pandemic also allowed for the creation of new businesses like the revival of the drive-in theater. Other new business was developed by the utilization of one’s craft as seen in the making and selling of masks. Do it yourself projects such as this or cooking and other forms of crafting became prevalent (Kirk and Rifkin 2020). During lockdowns, virtual spaces were vital in maintain sociality as was the use of social media to spread knowledge regarding Covid-19 as illustrated by Hannah. Once lockdowns were lifted and people were able to go out again, businesses adapted to serve people following new safety guidelines. This is seen in the use of outdoor dining in spaces where there had not been any previously like parking garages, and in the wearing of masks while in public and socially distancing. Though the risk

of infection from Covid-19 is still very real, people choose to take that risk, and engage in social gatherings.



## 5 Conclusion

In the first part of my ethnographic chapters I have illustrated how the spread of information via social media fueled the panic and distrust of authorities and scientists during the early months of the pandemic. I used theories on humor, conspiracy theory, and protest to show a cause and effect of the spreading and belief in misinformation. The rate at which information spread by use of social media allowed for ideas to be shared which in turn had dangerous, and sometimes deadly consequences exemplified in memes regarding disbelief in the realities of Covid-19. To combat this, social media sites and online platforms like YouTube put in place the fact checking of information shared on their platforms. In certain instances, this was thought to be a form of censorship thereby adding to beliefs on conspiracy theories regarding the pandemic. I also demonstrated the risk taking during the pandemic and supplied reasoning for which these risks were assumed when the outcome could be detrimental to these individuals.

Initially this project centered on the humorous memes, conspiracy theories and protest I observed on social media, which occurred in the US during lockdowns and at the beginning of the pandemic. Gradually I began to witness people adapting to the stay-at-home orders by way of staying social with others via use of the internet and the creation of virtual spaces to do so. In the latter part of chapter 4, I gave examples of this adaptation like the use of Zoom for virtual hangouts and karaoke. I showed how this technology allowed people to cope with the current situation and their uncertainty. These virtual spaces allowed for the engagement people are accustomed to during socializing, albeit from afar and over the internet.

Additionally, I have documented somewhat of a chronology of the pandemic over social media that occurred from March until August of 2020. This chronology begins with humor, develops into conspiracy theory, and then protest for some, while others created virtual spaces to stay social, then the acts of being social in public following safety guidelines put forth by the WHO and CDC, and lastly the ingenuity used to do the latter. In editing my thesis film, I realized a shift in my project from the use of social media during the pandemic to the socialization and adaptation which was occurring. I placed myself at the center of my film and used my positionality and reflexivity to illustrate how my life in northern Norway

differed from life back home in the US as I was observing it online via social media and news articles.

When people back home adapted to the new normal by creating virtual spaces in which to engage with each other, I was going to beaches to fish and grill. When they had to wear masks in public, I was serving food and drinks to people at the bar I work at mask less. When Paul was in the hospital and Hannah was consumed with fear and anxiety, I was using humor on FB to cope with my own uncertainty and worry. My lived pandemic experience was vastly different than those who I observed back in the states. Though we were all going through the pandemic simultaneously, we dealt with it differently. The effects of Covid-19 effected Hannah and Paul differently than others. Having almost died from the virus, they chose not to take any risks after Paul was well. They maintained being social in much safer ways than others by not having any contact with people unless through a door or window and not leaving their home. Others chose to follow guidelines and shelter in place, when necessary, then go out in public following guidelines such as wearing masks in public. Louie created a new business which provided jobs for some who had lost theirs, created income for himself and allowed people to free themselves from the prison of their homes by safely going out to a drive-in theater. Shelly aided hospitals by utilizing her craft and created masks for them when supply was short, then developed that into a new online business for herself. Louie and Shelly both supplied a need when a demand was created by the pandemic. This paper serves not only to document what occurred in the USA during my fieldwork but may also be analyzed to better understand people's coping strategies and ingenuity during times of crisis. This may lead to better preparedness in case of another pandemic or similar crisis.

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