From Sunday School to #SundayFunday: Social Media and the Semi-Public Performance of the Weekend

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The paper focuses on the role of internet technologies in the mediation of weekend activities in social networks, arguing that internet technologies facilitate and shape the social activities once occupied by more traditional institutions, namely religious communities. It compares three contemporary weekend events that have serve as identity-constructing performances in ways that religious communities have in the past. The three events are social drinking, exercise/fitness, and Sunday brunch. These three activities bear striking resemblance to the structure (such as ritual and symbols) and aims (such as community building) of religious communities. Moreover, social media facilitate the semi-public performance of these weekend activities, creating a new space for the construction of personal identity relative to the American weekend.

1 This essay is about the American weekend. More precisely, it is about the mediation of the American weekend. Internet technologies like social media platforms shape the way Americans of various generations both understand and perform their weekend. The performance of one's weekend by means of social media betrays ongoing construction of individual identity. Markers of identity had, in previous eras, been dominated by religious neighborhoods and worshipping communities for weekend activities. The shift of weekend activities is indicative of what Pew Research Forum has called "America's changing religious landscape." This essay focuses on three weekend activities—social drinking, fitness/exercise, and Sunday brunch—in order to demonstrate that non-religious weekend activities have, for many Americans, become new sites of identity-construction alongside and often in lieu of traditional sites like religious activities. The mediation of these activities through the textual and visual platforms of the internet highlight the importance of semi-public spaces for performing one's identity through one's chosen weekend activities.

Religion in America

2 In May 2015, Pew Research Forum published findings from a survey called *America's Changing Religious Landscape*. In the report, Pew helpfully compares its findings from 2015 to those from 2007. The effect of this comparison is to demonstrate the ways in which the religious identities and practices of Americans are changing, and changing quickly. Perhaps the most telling figure from the 2015 report is the change in the percentage of Americans who identify as "religiously unaffiliated." This group is sometimes referred to as the religious "nones," a notably imprecise category that attempts to capture the trend of religious disaffiliation and re-affiliation. The 2015 Pew report recognizes this difficulty, and its survey asked respondents to further identify themselves under the category of "religiously unaffiliated." The results from the survey indicate that "the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated—describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or 'nothing in particular'—has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%" (Pew Research Center 3).

3 I make no attempt here to explain the reasons for this rate of religious disaffiliation in the United States. This is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that benefits little from speculation over a primary cause. It is enough to say that Americans are, on the whole, becoming less affiliated with traditional religious communities. Data from within various traditions also demonstrate that even those Americans who affiliate are diverse in their religious practices. The report acknowledges this diversity, noting that religious identity and affiliation are based solely on self-reporting: "Catholics, for instance, are defined as all respondents who say they are Catholic, regardless of their specific beliefs and whether or not they

attend Mass regularly" (Pew Research Center 10).

4 Americans are less "religious" in their practices, at least within Christianity. Attendance at religious services is not an adequate marker for "religion" as a whole, given that services are not central to all religious identities. For Christians, however, attending communal worship services is generally understood as a central aspect of one's religious identity. This is more the case in some Christian traditions than others. For Catholic and Orthodox traditions, attending services is theologically important because of the centrality of sacramental practices. Attendance is central to the construction of religious identity for many traditions, however, because attending religious services is a semi-public act that can function prima facie as a confession. Going to church is a matter of seeing and being seen, regardless of but complementary to liturgical particularities.

5 Religion and religious communities no longer dominate the weekend for most Americans, and this is especially true of younger generations. The following essay posits three activities that now occupy the time and spaces traditionally reserved for religion on the weekend. But one cannot understand how these activities function in American culture today without considering their mediation. Social media has transformed American culture, especially for people under the age of 40. Specifically, it has changed what it means to be social, which has important effects for how individuals understand themselves relative to their family, friends, colleagues, and strangers with whom they interact. Social media sites that facilitate a visual mediation of one's weekend activities function in a similarly semi-public way as religious, confessional acts such as weekly mass attendance. Seen in light of what Pew calls a "changing religious landscape in America," it is possible to understand activities like social drinking, fitness and exercise, and brunch as "confessions" of personal identity vis-à-vis the weekend, even for those who remain religiously affiliated.

The Semi-Public Square

6 Religious traditions have both internal and external modalities, the latter of which operates in ways that further individual identity construction in the context of a community. This idea draws from Erving Goffman's idea of identity-construction through self-expression to various audiences. The concern here is less about doctrine or ethics of religious traditions and more about the visible, confessional acts of individuals within religious communities. In fact, the focus is even more circumscribed: I want to consider the simple act of seeing and being seen at regular worship services. For example, "going to mass" has a doctrinal and ritual valence: participation in a ritual that instantiates the doctrines of a particular religious tradition. But "going to church" also carries a cultural valence insofar as it establishes and maintains one's place in a community, especially by means of a highly visible act that we might call a semi-public confession. "Going to church" is both private and public. Indeed, it will vary by individual whether it is more personal or more public. Admittedly, church-going is for some people almost entirely external, with little personal belief or experience to complement the public act of seeing and being seen at a service like a Catholic mass.

7 Attending a religious service like a Catholic mass is a semi-public act. The audience of this act is often limited to the members of the particular worshipping community, but it retains an important dimension of visibility. This visibility was even more central to the act of attending religious services in the era of the relatively homogenous religious neighborhood. For example, in American Catholic neighborhoods in the first half of the 20th century, the local parish functioned as the social as well as the religious center of the neighborhood. The parish was understood in the context of a specific geographic area, the neighborhood, and the neighborhood was understood in the context of the religious center, the parish. In addition, these neighborhoods were often not incidental collections of Catholic people but physical artifacts of European immigration, clustering immigrants together by nationality.

8 The neighborhood once created the fabric of one's identity, focused largely on the religious community at its center. Despite this shift away from the religious subculture, attending a religious service retains a public dimension essential to the construction of individual identity. As with so many aspects of American

culture, religion has become more and more a matter of consumer choice. This means that the witness to the act of attending a religious service has become even more circumscribed than the neighborhood of the past. The audience of this act, therefore, is close to what Zizi Papacharissi calls a “niche audience” (200). One can actually control those who witness religious acts by changing communities, changing services within a community, or changing one’s mode of transportation. One is no longer swept up in the parade of neighborhood families marching their way to church on Sunday morning. Instead, one often makes a private choice for self or family based on many more factors than geographic proximity.

9 Papacharissi’s “niche audience,” however, is not about religious communities but about social media. She writes, “Enabling both identity expression and community building, social networking sites are structured initially around a niche audience, although their appeal frequently evolves beyond that target market” (Papacharissi 200). Social networking, both online and offline, is essentially about managing and performing one’s identity. Although the religious communities of the past may not have been consciously concerned with something like identity-construction, they did in fact provide a dominant or even primary context for the performance of identity not only with regard to religion, but to race and class as well. Both religious communities and social networking operate as a semi-public square for the performance of identity.

10 As the semi-public square of religious communities has become less attractive for younger generations, the semi-public square of social media has become more and more popular. These trends may not have a causal relationship, yet they do represent trends in the *where* and *how* of American identity construction and maintenance. According to Papacharissi, users in social media exist within a “cycle of impression management” (211). Users consciously craft content that contributes to the impression they want their niche audience(s) to have of them. As long as humans have been social, they have been caught in such a cycle, and media of various forms have facilitated such impressions. But social media have amplified two aspects of impression management: the choosing of one’s audience and the conscious behaviors that give the impression(s) of the self.

11 Insofar as one chooses various communities in which to participate, one has always chosen one’s audiences. Social media amplify this aspect of impression management by requiring the active management of audience(s) through various apparatuses. For example, one’s audience as a Facebook user is contingent upon “becoming Friends” with other users on the platform. It is possible to maintain a largely public Facebook profile without “Friending” other users, although Facebook is intended for the cultivation of particular audiences based on these Friendships. Twitter and Instagram tend to be more public, allowing users to “follow” other users without the mutual experience “Friending” one finds on Facebook. All three platforms include mechanisms by which users maintain various levels of privacy. According to Papacharissi, social media platforms “interpret and express the private/public distinction differently, producing online spaces that are structured to lend themselves to different styles of interaction” (207). How public or private one chooses to be online is just another aspect of impression management; the audience becomes a part of the impression itself as other users can see lists of one’s friends or followers.

12 Audience management is an important aspect of impression management, but the day-to-day “work” of impression management lies with the production of content. In order to delimit the scope of what follows, I would like to focus specifically on visual content: photos and videos one shares through social media. Perhaps the most obvious visual artifact in the cycle of impression management is the selfie. These self-portraits—prolific after the advent of cameraphones but not unheard of before—are “perceived to be a mechanism for becoming visible in incorporeal data streams, or as an alternate method of constructing identity” (Grotepass 282). The selfie can function in a variety of ways within impression management, from the simply aesthetic—displaying one’s physical attributes–to the more layered impression factors of location, activity, or companions. The latter form of selfie is enhanced by the selfie stick, which allows for a better angle so as to capture more of one’s context, including where a user is or whom a user is with.

13 Social media users post selfies and other visual content in order to manage their online identities. While

Twitter and Facebook dominate the social media landscape, Instagram continues to grow in popularity, both in the United States and globally with over 400 million users. The platform often gets incorporated into the content of the others, with posts on Instagram being woven into one's Facebook profile or Twitter feed. More than both Facebook and Twitter, Instagram privileges the visual. It does allow for captions and comments on its photos but its primary mode of discourse is the photo itself.

14 As the domain of leisure activities that give strong impressions of identity, the weekend is a particularly susceptible time for the production of content that manages one's identity to social media audiences. By "production" I simply mean taking photos of particular subjects or in particular ways so as to give intended impressions of the self. Social media has become a semi-public square of social interaction wherein identities and audiences are carefully managed. In short, one's identity is now constructed within various social media platforms in addition to and often instead of traditional sites of identity-construction such as religious communities.

Social Drinking

15 Social drinking has long been a popular weekend activity, especially among college students and older adolescents. Even when compared with celebratory drinking, alcohol consumption remains more prevalent "during typical weekend drinking" (Woodyard and Hallam 536). Although college remains somewhat "special" in terms of an enhanced drinking culture, it provides a helpful case study for understanding the relationship between weekend social drinking and social media, given that some studies show that as much as 98% of college students maintain a Facebook profile (Rodriguez, et al., 110). Social media activity provides a cache of social norms with regard to drinking for this demographic.

16 These studies point to the role of social media in the performance of a drinking identity. Users produce and engage with content online in order to manage the impression that curated audiences have of them. In fact, some research shows a discrepancy in the impression given by social media and actual drinking habits. Rodriguez, et al. found that "Facebook posts are not as strongly linked with drinking behavior among those with high drinking identity" (122). This implies that social media functions more as a mechanism for cultivating impressions of the self rather than as a mirror of offline habits.

17 Much of the research on the role of social media in college-aged drinking focuses on the amount of alcohol consumption. This is understandable given that the impetus for much of this research is the public health concern over binge drinking. There is more to consider, however, than the amount of alcohol consumed within a more general notion of alcohol identity. Social media platforms, especially in their highly visual aspects, allow users to craft more detailed impressions for their audiences than simply how much they are drinking. It is not just *that* or *how much* a person is drinking but what they are drinking, where they are drinking, with whom they are drinking, and for what purpose.

18 Social media has brought these identity-crafting aspects of social drinking into high relief. Users can create content on social media platforms in order to manage the impression that they are the kind of people who drink craft beers or martinis or rare scotch. They can create content that manages the impression that they are the kind of people who drink while watching that sports team or attending music festivals or frequenting cool bars. Social media content can also manage impressions of class, as is evidenced by Tumblr's *Rich Kids of Instagram*, "which collects photos of young, good-looking people drinking magnums of champagne at nightclubs," among other "rich kid" behavior (Marwick, 154). Although this is an extreme example of social drinking in the management of impressions about one's class, weekly posts about drinking Bud Light give a different impression about class than weekly posts about trying new craft beers.

19 The online mediation of one's drinking identity, therefore, can function as something like a "confession," insofar as it is a semi-public impression of one's commitments and habits. This, of course, is true for the religiously affiliated and unaffiliated alike. Social media has changed the act of one's social drinking, extending it beyond geographic particularities and local communities to carefully managed audiences.

Fitness and Exercise

20 Visual social media content is crucial to the management of impressions with regard to fitness and exercise as well. Like drinking, exercise is not exclusively a weekend activity. However, many of the exercise activities that lend themselves to mediation in the service of impression management do, indeed, take place on the weekends. For example, long runs such as 5ks, color runs, and marathons often take place on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Much like social drinking, the mediation of these activities captures not only the activity itself but one's location, companions, and purposes (e.g. charity).

21 Perhaps the clearest example of the relationship between exercise activities and social media is the case of CrossFit. The regimen of CrossFit "is constantly varied functional movements performed at relatively high intensity" (CrossFit). In addition to the commitment to variety in exercises, a defining feature of CrossFit lies in the community that forms around these activities. According to the CrossFit website, "Harnessing the natural camaraderie, competition and fun of sport or game yields an intensity that cannot be matched by other means" (CrossFit). But the community of CrossFit is not limited to one's particular gym, known as a "box."

22 CrossFit has become popular almost entirely through social media, and social media maintains the communal aspect at the center of CrossFit as well. As Leslie Heywood writes, "So much of the subculture is facilitated by digital media that it is impossible to separate that from its fully embodied aspects—that is, the actual performance of WODs [workouts of the day]. CrossFit wouldn't exist without the Internet" (24). Social media constructs a CrossFitter's identity within the context of the CrossFit community, as well as within the broader communities mediated by digital contexts. That is, visual platforms like Instagram allows a given user to manage the impression that he is the kind of person who spends his free time doing intense workouts surrounded by supportive companions. In fact, CrossFit photos and videos often notably feature a group of participants and/or supporters, not simply an individual performing exercises alone.

23 On the official CrossFit website, one finds a short video entitled "Let Me Tell You About CrossFit," by the CrossFit company and featuring various CrossFitters describing their experiences.

The video contains testimonials that are striking for their pseudo-religious tone. The people in the video describe CrossFit as a "lifestyle," a "passion," a "commitment," and a "family," something that makes you "happy." In a CrossFit box, a young man featured in the video says, "everybody knows your name, everybody loves you and you're a part of something bigger than just getting a workout." A young woman relays that CrossFit gave her something "extra that she needed in life."

24 CrossFit overlaps with another popular form of weekend fitness activity: extreme obstacle course races. One of the most popular is Tough Mudder, "a 21 km 'military-style' obstacle course with a curiously collaborative ethic" (Weedon 431). Like CrossFit, Tough Mudder and events like it are founded not only upon the idea of bettering one's body but on the centrality of bettering oneself in the context of a community. Weedon writes, "Tough Mudder trades on a spirit of togetherness—an esprit de corps or camaraderie—that its obstacles . . . are intended to materialize among participants, teammates, and strangers alike" (433).

25 The intensity and communal nature of fitness programs like CrossFit and Tough Mudder make them well-suited to the logics of social media. CrossFitters are encouraged to post pictures, videos, and results online. This not only broadens the sense of community within CrossFit but also cultivates personal identity in reference to fitness and exercise to all of one's social media audiences. For both CrossFit and Tough Mudder, the exercise event creates moments that transfer well to the domain of visual social media. Various social media platforms provide real-time updates to one's audiences by means of content like Instagram photos, which "tend toward the documentary, since mobile phones are continually present as users go about their day-to-day lives" (Marwick 142).

26 The intertwining of social media and these fitness programs ostensibly cultivates communities of support

and encouragement, as users learn from, lean on, and become inspired by one another. Impression management, however, is concomitant with this logic of the shared experience. Social media plays a central role in constructing identity for individuals in exercise and fitness contexts, as various platforms help the manage the impression of the kind of people they are vis-à-vis weekend activities. Perhaps even more clearly than social drinking, these intensely communal exercise and fitness practices demonstrate a confessional nature that becomes highly suggestive in light of the changing religious landscape of American culture.

27 Closely related to trends in fitness and exercise (and the mediation thereof) are trends in food and diet. For example, CrossFit organizations have been known to suggest certain diets, especially the high-protein Paleo diet ("Eat Like"). Like alcohol, food practices have also become popular subjects for social media, and contribute further to the managed impression of individual identity.

Sunday Brunch

28 When the characters of the television series *Arrested Development* want to meet up on Sunday morning, they go to a restaurant called Skip Church's for brunch. Writers of this show know that for many Americans, the time traditionally spent in religious settings is now being spent in non-religious social situations, specifically those that involve food. I focus here on brunch, although much of what is said here about Sunday morning brunch can be applied to other food-centric weekend activities that take place during times previously reserved for religious services. It is possible that farmers' markets, community festivals, and even activities like weddings and baby showers function in much the same way as Sunday brunch with regard to the construction of identity.

29 In a sense, brunch brings together the questions of identity surrounding both social drinking and exercise/fitness. Documenting one's food practices through visual social media often includes one's drinking habits and choices, and can also manage impressions of specific diet choices, such as vegetarianism or Paleo. Therefore, food practices facilitate the management of multiple facets of identity. As the quintessential weekend meal, brunch is particularly popular as the object of social media documentation in service of impression management.

30 According to Farha Ternikar, author of *Brunch: A History*, brunch began as a British tradition. It became popular in the United States in the cities of New York and New Orleans, whose culinary traditions had a great impact on what we now consider standard brunch foods, such as eggs Benedict and French toast (Ternikar 1). While brunch is no longer reserved for Sunday, it was long understood in its relationship to Sunday religious services. According to Ternikar, "In 1939, the *Washington Post* featured another significant article on brunch, emphasizing brunch as a pre- or post-church meal" (13). Up through the 1950s, brunch was a meal served after church, composed of easily assembled foods that helped make Sunday more restful (Ternikar 15).

31 By the 1980s, however, brunch had become a cultural practice closer to how it functions today. Ternikar provides a passage from a 1980 article in *Chicago Tribune* that illustrates the shifting role of brunch in the weekend practices of Americans:

> You do not eat brunch. You do brunch. It is the first taste of Sunday, sweet Sunday, after Saturday night…With the loosening of Sunday's rigid schedule of church and dinner, a relaxed and informal brunch is a reflection of this freedom. But brunch, like all good things, was a long time coming…And maybe because anything goes, people adore it. (Qtd. in Ternikar 25)

32 Over 35 years later, people still adore brunch. Brunch has always functioned as something of a status symbol for both British and American culture. Social media, however, has amplified the degree to which brunch operates as a vehicle of identity.

33 Ternikar writes, “Brunch may have begun as an after-church tradition for English Catholics or as a late Sunday breakfast for Saturday-night pub crawlers, but today it has become a contemporary symbol of culinary decadence and comfort food” (xiv). No longer dominated by etiquette-obsessed housewives or hotel caterers, brunch is a cultural institution whereby Americans perform their affluence, ideologies, and even their attitudes toward traditional religious practices. Sunday brunch is a meal for those who do not have to work on Sundays. Sunday brunch is long and lingering, full of rich foods and often including fancy drinks. Sunday brunch is also a social event, even becoming a weekly tradition for some friend groups. All of these aspects of brunch can be captured and conveyed through visual social media. Food is one of the most popular subjects on Instagram, and with its characteristic foods, timing, and rituals, Sunday brunch is particularly suited for the documentary logic of the Instagram user.

34 Of course church-goers still go to brunch, and of course brunch-goers still go to religious services. Coupled with the rise of the religious nones, however, Sunday brunch might be emerging as a site for the performance of identity in lieu of religious communities. Snapping photos of food gives impressions of class status, as well as diet practices and ideologies. For example, one can convey commitments to local, organic, sustainable, vegan, etc., foods by providing visual evidence of one’s eating habits. Social media also help maintain impressions of one’s social ties and traditions. Brunch can function as a weekly ritual for loosely tied communities of friends. Posing with a brunch cocktail in front of a plate of eggs Benedict on Sunday morning at ten o’clock conveys specific commitments to the social network. Its carefree air is in fact carefully constructed and communicated, operating even as a confessional act about one’s weekend values and commitments.

Conclusion

35 The rise of the religious “nones” continue to inspire consternation, celebration, and speculation. Parallel to the growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated is the continuous rise in the use of social media. Dismissed often as a distraction from social connectivity, social media has actually come to define what it means to be social for younger generations of Americans. Social media documents the habits and activities of its users, and the sharing of content crafts individual identity. The highly visual nature of social media, bolstered by the ease of snapping photos and videos offered by modern phones, contributes greatly to “impression management.” Social media platforms such as Instagram have changed how its users mediate their weekends to their social networks. The cases of social drinking, exercise and fitness, and Sunday brunch illustrate that social media function as primary means by which users manage impressions of their identity. As the traditional domain of religious communities, weekends are the spaces of confessions—semi-public acts that demonstrate one’s commitments. We cannot yet point directly at such activities replacing religious activities per se. These mediated weekend activities, however, have begun to function as performative acts akin to the religious confessions of traditional communities.

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