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How Organizations Claim Authenticity: The Coproduction of Illusions in Underground Restaurants

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Abstract. With perceptions of authenticity offering contemporary organizations a key competitive advantage in the marketplace, a growing body of research has investigated "authenticity work": the diverse ways in which organizational actors fabricate authenticity claims for their audience members. However, claiming authenticity is a challenging and problematic task, because organizations must weigh how much authenticity they can safely project without incurring backfire. This is further complicated by consumers' fickle and contradictory attitudes regarding authenticity work. This study examines this challenge by asking how organizations can claim authenticity in a way that aligns with their audiences' variable understandings and expectations. Drawing on a qualitative study of underground restaurants—alternative social dining establishments, also known as "pop-ups" or "supper clubs"—I show that organizers claim authenticity through the coperformance of three illusions: community, transparency, and gift-giving. Instead of rejecting these illusions, most diners and underground organizers knowingly embrace them as authentic. This paper suggests that authenticity work, far from sending a one-way signal that audience members passively accept or reject, involves a continual process that generates the active co-construction of illusions by organizers and their audiences.

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Keywords: authenticity • illusions • co-construction • qualitative methods

Introduction

The search for authenticity in the marketplace—for honest producers who create "real products"—has become a distinctive marker of contemporary life (Fine 2003, Potter 2011). In the organizational context, authenticity is defined as audience members' subjective perceptions of an organization's external expressions as genuinely representing its identity (Baugh 1988, Grazian 2003, Trilling 2009, Frake 2016, Hahl 2016, Hahl et al. 2017). In other words, attributions of authenticity occur when audience members' experiences with a product or producer align with the organization's identity claims. A growing body of scholarship in organizational studies has found that perceptions of authenticity offer many organizations a key competitive advantage in the marketplace (Podolny and Hill-Popper 2004; Carroll and Wheaton 2009; Kovács et al. 2013; Lehman et al. 2014; Verhaal et al. 2015, 2017; Frake 2016; Hahl 2016). This research reveals that consumer purchase behavior can be driven by perceptions of authenticity that supersede the salience of purely objective product characteristics. In art, for example, there is a long tradition of valuing originals over duplicates (Newman and Bloom 2012), and a restaurant's authenticity depends on more than food quality alone (Kovács et al. 2013).

Given the very real consequences for organizations that successfully generate perceptions of authenticity, a growing body of research has argued that organizations can strategically manufacture authenticity via signaling tactics, which are then either accepted or rejected by the receiving consumers (Peterson 1997, 2005; Jones et al. 2005; Carroll and Wheaton 2009). For instance, organizations often use self-transparency to signal authenticity, showing audience members the production process through glimpses of an organizational "backstage" where the real work supposedly occurs (Goffman 1959; Grazian 2003, 2010), a strategy deployed, for example, when a Chinese restaurant hangs cooked Peking ducks in its windows (Lehman et al. 2014). Other tactics that organizations use to claim authenticity, as noted in the literature, include the use of rhetoric (such as occurs when luxury winemakers use storytelling to expose their hand-crafted techniques) (Beverland 2005), referencing geographic origins (for instance, restaurants citing local sourcing) (Johnston and Baumann 2010), or showing disdain of commercial interests (such as microbreweries labeling mass producers as superficial money makers) (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000).

Such "authenticity work" (Peterson 2005) can, however, also be a risky and challenging act (Grazian 2010).

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Because organizations are increasingly rewarded for being authentic, they may fall prey to engaging in too much authenticity work, sometimes to the point of discomfort. For example, signals of transparency are valued highly in claims of authenticity, as noted above, but too much transparency may be off-putting for some consumers (e.g., it is one thing to see a cooked duck hanging in the window but quite another to see it being killed). Consequently, for organizations seeking to claim authenticity, it is impossible to know ex ante how much authenticity work is appropriate. To understand this unique challenge, one must also consider the consumers' role in policing the boundary around what is an appropriate commitment to authenticity work. However, consumers often display contradictory understandings of authenticity, and their expectations of what constitutes plausible authenticity signaling can shift (Beverland and Farrelly 2009, Trilling 2009, O'Connor et al. 2017, Hahl et al. 2018). This raises the question: how can organizations claim authenticity in a way that aligns with audience's variable understandings and expectations of authenticity?

To answer this question, I conducted a study of underground restaurants (also known as "pop-ups" or "supper clubs"): immersive social dining experiences staged in unconventional locations, such as a chef's personal home, that feel more like dinner parties than traditional fine dining. This study adopts a qualitative inductive approach, drawing from interviews, participant observation of the production and consumption of underground experiences, and online secondary documents. I find that underground restaurants claim authenticity through the coperformance of three illusionary experiences: community, transparency, and gift-giving. First, organizers use rhetoric, communal tables, homey aesthetics, and selective membership lists to promote an illusionary experience of community that is characterized by an ephemeral state of camaraderie and togetherness, whereby diners who are strangers refer to one another as friends or even family. The experience establishes a participatory environment, where diners engage with other guests and become coconspirators in creating the illusion of being part of a community. Second, organizers craft the illusion of transparency by selectively revealing aspects of the cooking process and minimizing the visibility of elements of the process that may be incompatible with the illusionary experience associated with an "all-access pass." Diners become coperformers when they engage directly with producers' offerings (for example, when they ask questions or slip into the kitchen to view the production process). Third, organizers downplay and distract audience members from the economic transaction that grants them access and without which, there would be no underground restaurant; instead, they promote the illusion of gift-giving by using alternative payment devices (e.g., discrete envelopes for cash). When successfully coproduced, these three illusions together create an authentic underground dining experience, which informants frequently described using the metaphor of a dinner party.

The main finding of this study is that organizational actors and their audiences reach agreement on authenticity through the joint performance of illusions. The authenticity of the experience requires consumers to become active participants in illusionary claim-making, enlisting them also as "workers" in authenticity work (Peterson 2005). These findings contribute to the literature on authenticity along two interrelated veins. First, the paper reorients scholarly attention by widening the focus to include all participants in authenticity performances, not just organizational actors; second, the study considers the role that illusions play in organizational tactics that are designed to claim authenticity, emphasizing the role of coperformance. Taken together, these contributions have implications for how we think more broadly about the organizational manufacturing of authenticity. This study suggests that authenticity work, far from consisting of a one-way signal that audience members passively accept or reject, involves a continual process that generates the active co-construction of illusions by organizers and audiences. Consequently, to succeed at authenticity work, organizational actors must engage their audience members in a meaningful and participatory way so that both parties can collectively establish authenticity claims.

The Organizational Manufacturing of Authenticity

Drawing from a rich history in sociology and anthropology of exploring how people assign symbolic meaning to everyday objects and experiences as authentic (De Saussure 1983, Peterson 1997, Fine 2003, Wherry 2006), management and organizational theory have only recently turned their attention to authenticity. In this burgeoning field, scholars have generally agreed on viewing authenticity as a dimension of an organization's identity (Baron 2004), defined by reference to audience members' subjective perceptions that an organization's external expressions genuinely represent its identity (Baugh 1988, Grazian 2003, Trilling 2009, Frake 2016, Hahl 2016, Hahl et al. 2017). An organization is perceived as authentic then when the experience that audience members have with it aligns with the organization's identity claims. Rather than emphasizing the content of authenticity claims—which are always culturally and historically contingent (Peterson 1997)—this definition emphasizes the structure of such claims and audience members' corresponding experiences of them (i.e., is there alignment between projected and internal qualities?) (Lizardo 2015).

Researchers have argued that organizations can manufacture authenticity strategically through claim-making

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activities (Peterson 1997, Jones et al. 2005). Peterson (1997, 2005) termed this process authenticity work to summarize the diverse ways in which social actors can fabricate authenticity claims, which are then either accepted or rejected by the receiving audience. The term "work" emphasizes the implementation of skillful and purposeful signaling tactics on the part of producers to give the impression that they are authentic (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). In an organizational setting, this is most often achieved when firms use signaling tactics that show (or tell) consumers that their actions genuinely represent their identities (i.e., "I am who I say I am"). Below, I review a range of steps cited in the literature that organizations can take when promoting authenticity: self-transparency of the backstage via physical or rhetorical strategies, referencing historical or geographical origins, and playing up noneconomic motives.

Self-transparency, especially in the production process, is privileged as a means of visibly communicating claims of authenticity, because its voluntary quality engenders trust in and intimacy with audience members (Potter 2011). Audiences perceive self-transparency as authentic, because it is indisputable (Carroll and Wheaton 2009). Physical or symbolic cues that provide glimpses of the backstage—private spaces where the work of an operation occurs—are valued by consumers, because they perceive access to a more intimate area of organizational life as evidence of openness and vulnerability in contrast to the artificially staged customer-facing front operations, which are designed specifically to impress an audience (Goffman 1959, Grazian 2003). In this way, an organization can use visibility of the production process to project authenticity, which occurs when a café places a coffee roaster within view (Carroll and Wheaton 2009), a winery makes its barrels visible to visitors (Negro et al. 2010), or a modern dance troupe removes the curtains to make the backstage the new frontstage (Sagiv 2014). Often, activities exhibiting transparency highlight specialist production methods: for example, a distillery might market its traditional method of bottling single-malt Scotch whisky (McKendrick and Hannan 2014), a microbrewery might emphasize its artisanal techniques (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, Beverland et al. 2008, Frake 2016), or an Italian winemaker might take pride in communicating its adherence to aging wine in oak barrels (Negro et al. 2011).

As these examples indicate, authenticity is frequently manufactured through discourse (Jones et al. 2005). Research has shown that consumers regularly depend on linguistic cues (for example, a product's name) when they make snap judgments about a product's or producer's authenticity, typically when they cannot easily differentiate goods based on physical attributes alone (e.g., the taste of beer) (Beverland et al. 2008, Verhaal et al. 2015). Narratives and storytelling are especially constructive in authenticity work, because they can emphasize particular product attributes (Kovács et al. 2013, 2017) and detail the type of work involved in producing the product, bringing audience members close to organizational life (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). For instance, luxury wine producers frequently regale visitors with stories about their wineries' histories, thereby projecting commitment to traditional production methods (Beverland 2005).

Linkages to the origins of a producer or product, which often tie it to a particular time or place, have also been cited to promote authenticity. For instance, the notion of "terroir"—when a product embodies the ethos of a specific geographical location—has gained currency not only in the wine industry (Guy 2003, Beverland 2005) but also in connection with beer (Verhaal et al. 2017, Cruz et al. 2018) and food (DeSoucey 2010) as a key factor in authenticity claim-making. A product's relationship to a specific place grants it a distinctive character that competitors cannot easily replicate. For example, in rap or country music, an artist's geographic origins often play a unique part in establishing a market identity (Lena and Peterson 2008). Accordingly, when such geographic ties are under threat—as they were when foreign conglomerates acquired Scottish distilleries—the authenticity of a product can come into question (McKendrick and Hannan 2014). History, too, can lend authenticity to a company's actions. For example, the Carlsberg group regularly references the Latin phrase semper ardens ("always burning"), which is engraved in stone at its original headquarters; it uses the phrase almost like a brand name to sell its modern beer (Hatch and Schultz 2017). By the same token, organizations may selectively forget historical elements that conflict with their desire for authenticity (Anteby and Molnar 2012). This phenomenon occurs as well in the reconstruction of historical sites—such as Lincoln's (Bruner 1994) or Shakespeare's homes (Grayson and Martinec 2004)—where organizers selectively curate historical facts to legitimate authenticity claims (Koontz 2010).

Finally, organizations may seek to convey the message that they disdain narrow commercial interests to establish their authenticity, deploying a "noneconomic logic" to signal commitment to their clientele (Baron 2004, p. 14). Following Bourdieu's (1993) notion of artistic "disinterestedness," actors who disavow material rewards will signal intrinsic motivations (Hahl et al. 2017). For example, independent film directors shun economic success for claims of creative authenticity (Delmestri et al. 2005), gourmet food magazines privilege the exoticism of poor rural producers (Johnston and Baumann 2007), co-ops position themselves against large for-profit natural food chains by emphasizing their cooperative values (Hsu and Hannan 2005), and microbreweries use rhetorical strategies to define themselves in opposition to mass brewers that they frame as cash cows (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000). As this final

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example illustrates, organizations can signal authenticity through a combination of the tactics reviewed above. For example, microbreweries use brewery tours to show visitors their production processes, narratives to emphasize traditional methods and noncommercial motives, and references to geographic locality to enhance the distinctive quality of their beers in contrast to those of commercial mass brewers (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, Cruz and Beck 2013, Verhaal et al. 2017).

Although this prior work has fruitfully investigated some successful organizational strategies for authenticity claim-making, there are also potential challenges and pitfalls. Given its high value in the marketplace, organizations have increasingly felt incentivized to signal their authenticity. More authenticity claim-making means, however, that organizations may find themselves in scenarios where authenticity work that is too zealous can backfire. Take, for instance, the assumption of self-transparency: candidly sharing too much of organizational life with consumers could potentially risk alienation—for example, no diner wants a truly Orwellian exposé of kitchen life where the "French cook will spit in the soup" (Orwell 1933, p. 80). Similarly, if a narrative is too direct, such as making a big show through self-proclamations (e.g., "I am authentic"), it may seem overly manufactured (Kovács et al. 2017). Indeed, a major feature of authenticity work is that producers seem to be as "natural" as possible, not manipulated, when fabricating claims (Peterson 1997, p. 267).

Finally, with respect to the posture of appearing above commercial interests, too much disinterestedness, such as explicit expressions that disavow financial motives (e.g., "I am not in it for the money"), may give the impression that a producer is only pretending to be authentic (Hahl and Zuckerman 2014). A similar phenomenon occurred in a case in which luxury wineries severely discounted their wines and experts began to question their quality and authenticity (Beverland 2005). Indeed, when audience members or consumers begin to doubt a producer's motives, authenticity becomes most salient (Trilling 2009, Hahl 2016). As these examples reveal, authenticity work is far from a one-size-fits-all proposition, and it is nearly impossible for organizations to forecast in advance the boundary between what is appropriate and what is excessive.

To understand this unique and increasingly important challenge for organizations, scholars must also consider the roles and expectations of audience members in producing the boundary surrounding the appropriate extent of authenticity work. Research shows that, far from being passive receivers of organizationally manufactured messages, consumers can be fickle, indecisive, and contradictory when judging authenticity—people regularly draw contradictory conclusions about what is and is not authentic, even disagreeing over the degree of authenticity that they attribute to any single performance (Beverland and Farrelly 2009, Trilling 2009, Kovács et al. 2017, Hahl et al. 2018). These qualities affect the claim-making process for organizations, because consumers will have varying expectations for what constitutes effective authenticity work. For instance, although using place as a referent can help establish authenticity, not everyone appreciates all that comes with a particular geography, such as when American diners crave "exotic" dishes that are not terribly far removed from their Americanized tastes (Lu and Fine 1995, Gaytán 2008, Grazian 2010).

Consequently, if organizations can manufacture authenticity—as the research reviewed above has argued—how then can organizations align their actions with audience members' varied and sometimes shifting desires for and expectations of authenticity? In other words, how can organizational actors and their audiences reach collective agreement and achieve perceptions of authenticity? These questions are important, because if authenticity is ultimately defined by the alignment between what a product or producer claims to be and what consumers experience that product or producer to be, research must consider how consumers and producers resolve disagreements between the claims, expectations, and experiences associated with authenticity.

Case Setting, Methods, and Data Analysis

Study Context: Underground Restaurants

This study explores organizational authenticity by focusing on the alternative culinary business of underground restaurants defined as temporary social dining establishments run in unconventional locations. An underground restaurant is a small entrepreneurial venture in which a chef and part-time employees (paid or volunteered) serve between 8 and 50 guests. Although the fixed multicourse menus offered resemble those found in fine dining establishments, an underground restaurant experience is rarely just about the food. Rather, it is, in the words of Feastly (a website advertising underground dinners), an "authentic eating experience." Although underground restaurants constitute an idiosyncratic case, how they promote authenticity can be applied to other experience-based settings (for example, leisure services; see the discussion for additional examples), whereby producers give precedence to the consumption experience over a product's economic utility (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Although the restaurant meal has a long tradition as a spectacle, such access to production, which often takes the form of a chef's table in or adjacent to the kitchen, increasingly characterizes modern dining, as restaurants have become sites of "conspicuous production" (Ferguson 2014, p. 114). Underground restaurants take this experience one step farther by dramatically blurring the line between where cooks create a meal and where diners consume it,

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dismantling the traditional divide between producer and consumer found in standard restaurants. Underground eateries then do not appeal to everyone, instead targeting the "experiential diner": a patron willing to pay more for these often costly alternative dining experiences (Eventbrite 2015).

Underground restaurants differ in several ways from the traditional dining experience, but perhaps most importantly, the goals and motivations of underground chefs differ from those of their more conventional culinary peers. Field work and interviews revealed that underground chefs were a mix of skilled freelancing amateurs with daytime jobs and culinary workers who seek a creative outlet that gives them more freedom than restaurant cooking. These part-time cooks frame what they do as a hobby, although some describe ambiguous goals, such as future restaurant ownership (Demetry 2017). They do not purport to be running profitable enterprises in themselves. Consequently, few chefs make a living from staging underground restaurants alone. Instead, these alternative eateries provide reputational returns for entrepreneurial cooks, advertising their names in the local culinary community, helping them to build a dedicated customer base, and acquiring the necessary skills—and potential investment resources—for transitioning to a standard brick-and-mortar restaurant.

Methods and Data Collection

This study adopts an inductive qualitative approach, which lends itself well to exploring in detail how organizations devise and deploy various tactics to craft perceptions of authenticity on the ground. I draw from several qualitative sources: participant observation, interviews, and secondary materials. I participated actively in the organizational activities of the underground restaurants that I studied: working as a volunteer cook in the kitchen, interacting with clientele as a server or host, and less often, attending as a paying guest. I observed over 40 dinners from 2010 to 2013, mostly repeat observations at three Chicago area underground restaurants (see Table 1 for more details): (1) Hidden Kitchen fed approximately 30–50 diners once a month in a variety of unconventional locations (e.g., an abandoned warehouse) and was founded by an engineer-turned-chef who focused on Mexican fusion cuisine; (2) Science Cuisine served between 8 and 12 guests once a month in the personal apartment of a married couple, both self-taught cooks, and focused on molecular gastronomy, and (3) Saturday Dinners, the longest-running establishment in my sample, consisted of two professionally trained chefs who cooked rustic farm-to-table cuisine for around two dozen guests several times a month in the home of one of the chefs. I also conducted a handful of one-night observations across the cities where I conducted the interviews.

I interviewed most of my informants ($n = 106$) after I had completed my ethnographic observations using my field notes to help design my questions. Nearly all interviews were conducted in person and lasted between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours; they were recorded and later transcribed for coding purposes. I first interviewed chefs and cofounders ($n = 65$), whom I contacted directly through email (their addresses were generally publicly available on their websites), and then staff ($n = 15$; voluntary and paid), whom I asked for interviews during observations. For more well-hidden organizations, I relied on a snowball method, asking interviewees to direct me to other informants (Lincoln and Guba 1985). I next interviewed diners ($n = 22$), whom I contacted based on chefs' suggestions or solicited directly during my field observations. Finally, I interviewed hosts ($n = 4$) who rented out spaces to underground restauranteurs. All quotes from the interviews are labeled by informant group and identifier number (e.g., Diner #1–#22, Chef #1–#65).

Underground restaurants have become a global metropolitan phenomenon; accordingly, I traveled to London, San Francisco, and Los Angeles as well as Chicago to conduct interviews, mostly with chefs (see Table 2 for a summary of interviewees). I focused primarily on these four cities, because they featured numerous underground restaurants, granting additional opportunities for observations and interviews. This narrow focus on only four locations also, of course, imposes a limitation on my study insofar as it does not enable me to present a broadly holistic picture of the underground restaurant phenomenon but instead, represents a North American/Anglo iteration.

The theme of authenticity first emerged unsolicited in my interviews with chefs and employees, often in response to questions about the goals that inform the running of an underground restaurant. For instance, in one of my first interviews, one of the two chefs behind Saturday Dinners (one of my core field sites; described above) raised concerns about authenticity when asked to create a mission statement for their organization: "If we really had to put a word on [the mission statement], it definitely would be 'authentic.'" In addition to "authenticity," other key words functioning as the "buzzwords" that Lindholm (2008) argues have become prized indicators of authenticity, such as "intimate," "unique," "genuine," "real," and "pure," appeared in these initial conversations. Reflecting this early finding, I added a question on authenticity to the end of my interview protocol for diners, asking whether they had found anything about the underground dining experience that was authentic. I did not define authenticity for them, leaving the question open ended. Hence, diners were prompted to think about what seemed to them to be authentic in the dining experience, but notions of authenticity emerged regularly in the interviews,

Table 1. Chicago Field Site Description

	Hidden Kitchen	Science Cuisine	Saturday Dinners
Participant observation	20 dinners over two plus years	Eight dinners over six months	Four dinners over two years
Dinner size	30–50	8–12	16–24
Location	Mostly nomadic, occupied a variety of locations, including a downtown loft, an artist's studio, a historical mansion, a garden, and a woodworking workshop	Dinners were always held in the personal homes of the chefs	Dinners were held mostly in the personal home of the chef. A few select dinners occurred at the home of a regular diner or brewpub
Staff	Mix of volunteers (two to three) and part-time paid employees (four to six) depending on the event size	Two chefs and one part-time paid sous-chef	Two chefs and two to three part-time paid employees
Price	$75	$55	$45–$85
Organizational history and identity	Started in 2007 by a chef who previously worked for one of the first underground restaurants in the United States. Frequently incorporated an artistic dimension in dinners (musicians, live painting). Self-described as "collaborative communal dining experience"	Started in 2011 by a married couple, both self-taught cooks. Provided modern and experimental styles of cooking focused on the physical and chemical alterations of ingredients. Self-described as a "fun dining experience in our cozy apartment"	Started in 2005 by two friends who met in culinary school and worked as line cooks in Chicago restaurants. Served comfort food with a focus on farm-to-table dining and seasonal ingredients. Self-described as a "community dining operation"

especially regarding diners' motivations for attending the dinners and when describing what they found most enjoyable about the experience. In the findings, I include many of the questions that I asked informants when presenting their interview excerpts.

Most of the organizations that I observed were rather successful at communicating authenticity, and therefore, I also collected secondary materials to document failures of authenticity: specific writings about each of the organizations whose founders/chefs I interviewed, such as personal blogs, local press coverage, and online reviews (e.g., Yelp), to analyze patrons' and food critics' evaluations. Because of their often anonymous nature, online reviews provided striking insights into unsuccessful authenticity work. Additionally, I saved screenshots of websites or Facebook pages to gather information about how an underground restaurant presented itself to consumers. Organizations typically posted mission statements on these web pages, providing examples of public authenticity claims. Organizers would also advertise dinners through email, sharing menu teasers and stories behind the inspiration for a given event. Excerpts from secondary documents are cited throughout the text (e.g., Chase 2010).

Data Analysis

Following a grounded theory approach, the data analysis was inductive and overlapped with data collection

Table 2. Informant Demographics

Informant type	No. interviewed	Gender breakdown	Average age, years	General characteristics
Chef and founders	65	Male: 66%; female: 34%	34	Approximately one-half of informants had professional kitchen experience, and one-half were part-time hobbyist cooks hoping to transition their underground restaurants into formal brick-and-mortar eateries. The majority (66%) had earned at least a bachelor's degree.
Staff	15	Male: 40%; female: 60%	32	Seventy-five percent had professional culinary experience. Roles ranged from dishwasher to front of the house. Three interviewed were "volunteers," giving their time to help in the kitchen to learn more about cooking.
Diner	22	Male: 50%; female: 50%	42	Highly educated group: 82% had college degrees, and many had postgraduate degrees. Most were in the professional sector, ranging from university professors to consultants.
Host	4	Male: 50%; female: 50%	38	Typically owned a permanent restaurant space that was rented out for one evening a week when regularly closed (for instance, Monday night).
Total	106			

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(Glaser and Strauss 1967, Corbin and Strauss 2008). The analysis progressed roughly from creating lower-level codes to developing higher-level theoretical categories (often called "first-order" and "second-order" codes, respectively), although at times, these phases were recursive (Van Maanen 1979). I began open coding, reading my initial set of field notes and transcripts line by line and looking for general trends without reference to literature or theory. As noted above, it was during this initial phase of coding that authenticity became salient. As I gathered additional data, I continued open coding, a process that generated over 100 first-order codes. These codes were largely descriptive, and they were often based on my informants' own linguistic terms (e.g., "being a foodie," "making friends," "trust," "giving tips," "payment"). Because certain codes became more "saturated"—cases in which I saw similar instances of a code occurring repeatedly—I focused my coding strategies more narrowly (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 61). I found that many of these saturated first-order codes were connected to the work that chefs and employees put into creating the underground experience as well as diners' evaluations of this experience.

As I began to identify conceptual patterns in my data pertaining to creating and consuming the dining experience, I grouped connected first-order codes to form second-order categories (e.g., framing the experience, social cohesion strategies). After developing these categories, I began exploring how they were related through "axial coding" (Strauss 1987)—the process of finding relationships between categories to develop theory. I conducted axial coding as an iterative and reflexive process, returning to selected data several times to inform a more fine-grained analysis and finding new and different connections that were shaped by my reading of the literature and discussions with colleagues. During this process, I found not only similarities between categories but also differences and tensions between them, which I explored further through writing memos. For example, I was struck by the discrepancy between the linked categories of inclusion and exclusion of participants in connection with creating community. From these memos, I distilled my second-order categories even further into aggregate dimensions that captured the tensions that I observed within linked categories (e.g., community, transparency, and gift-giving). I drew on my second-order categories, aggregate dimensions, and existing theory to create arguments for the coperformance of illusions, which I explore further below in my findings.

Crafting an Authentic Underground Restaurant Experience

In this findings section, I draw from interviews, ethnographic observations, and secondary documents to show how underground producers craft perceptions of authenticity with their diners by jointly performing three illusionary experiences: community, transparency, and gift-giving. To successfully deliver these illusions, producers and consumers work together to manage tensions between appearances and reality using material and cognitive techniques to detract from any action that is inconsistent with the illusion being presented.

The plan for the rest of this section is as follows. First, I briefly discuss what the successful creation of authenticity looks like in the underground restaurant setting. Second, I review how authenticity occurs via the illusions of community, transparency, and gift-giving. Third, I end by comparing these three illusions and summarizing how they work together.

An Authentic Underground Restaurant Experience

The chefs and diners that I observed and interviewed characterized an authentic underground restaurant experience as an intimate and immersive social event, akin to spending an evening at a friend's house. Diners regularly used the metaphor of a dinner party to express the authenticity of an underground restaurant experience. For instance, when I asked what was authentic about underground dining, diners often cited the dinner party atmosphere: "the best ones feel like a really great big dinner party (#17)," "I treat it the same way as like if I went to a friend's house for dinner (#3)," and "I also think the authentic part comes, again, back to going over to your friend's house for dinner and that's a thing that I really like to do" (#5). The metaphor of a dinner party highlights the unique qualities of underground dining that deliver to patrons a casual social experience that contrasts with what they experience in a standard restaurant. A diner reflected on the difference:

> You're asking like what makes it authentic as a dining experience? I mean, it's that you're in somebody's home. . . . It's very welcoming. You kind of feel like you are at a friend's house having dinner, no pressure. If [you] used the wrong fork, no one is going to gasp from across the room. No one is going to think less of you. (#10)

By emulating dinner parties, underground restaurants evoked nostalgic social eating experiences as an interviewee explained: "I think it is authentic in the sense that it is in someone's house and it's, again, trying to get back to sort of, I don't want to say primitive, but fundamental sort of way of being where dining is a social experience" (Diner #20). "After all," one blog commenter summed up, "supper clubs are the new dinner parties" (Homer 2011). For producers, creating a dinner party atmosphere was the ultimate goal, as one chef reported: "we want to provide a great, whole evening, the feel of attending a dinner party" (#38).

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Just as guests at a dinner party engage directly with their host for the evening, diners seeking an authentic experience at the underground restaurants interacted directly with seemingly charming chefs and cooks who were open and transparent about their work. For guests, this connection with the producers made the whole experience more intimate than standard dining; in the brief words of an online reviewer, "the intimacy is what it is all about." A diner also reflected on her relationships with the producers as a central attraction:

> I think that the thing that makes underground dinner clubs so appealing is the connection with the chefs; the ability to get in-depth information on source, technique, recipe, motivation, etc., and to get to know the people making the food. It's a deeper relationship with dining than a restaurant. (#6)

When asked what makes such a dinner a success, another diner also cited the producers' charismatic appeal, implying their inherent authenticity: "I think it's the personality of the whole operation. The very homey feeling.... There is this sense that this is a *real* place and they are *real* people, there's no bullshit, there is no phoniness" (#15; emphasis added). For diners, having direct access to entrepreneurial chefs who were "living out their dream of entertaining people" was "the more authentic thing" (#18). Moreover, these feelings of intimacy were not exclusive to the diners; producers also perceived authenticity in the relationships that they crafted with their guests as one chef expressed: "I love sort of the connectivity between the guests and the kitchen and how that interacts in place" (#63).

What diners and producers perceive and expect to be authentic in underground restaurants is, however, often far from the reality of the operation. An underground restaurant is not a dinner party. It trades on the artifice of an *idealized* dinner party. The strangers collected around an underground restaurant's communal table are not friends and do not stay in contact as they would if they were attending a conventional dinner party (indeed, only 2 of 22 diners interviewed reported ever having created a lasting friendship from a dinner event). The connectivity that producers have with their guests is rarely of the same intimate quality that a familiar dinner party host would enjoy, largely because of the challenge of creating intimacy between producers and consumers over the course of only a few hours. Dinners occur in homes, but the homes have been converted to curated living spaces crafted to feel rustic. Finally, unlike a conventional dinner party where a host offers a meal as a gift to his or her guests, diners pay for their chefs' labor—often in pricey sums.

Although some actors can be sincerely taken in by their own acting when they host or attend an underground event, unaware of themselves as performers, others are more cognizant that they are manipulating social appearances (Goffman 1959). Although most of the diners that I interviewed or observed lauded the dinner party experience, many were well aware that they were not attending a real-life dinner party. One journalist's review revealed tensions between reality and appearances: "the night resembled a dinner party at someone's house, which it was—with the exception that the 20 or so guests [were] mindful of the chefs and not as chummy as with actual friends" (Borrelli 2010). Another diner straightforwardly explained it was "the illusion of the dinner party" (#8) that was most attractive.

In short, informants compare an authentic underground dining experience with a dinner party, characterized by a convivial atmosphere and the sharing of food and spirits; however, most chefs and diners recognized that this authenticity rested on the creation of illusionary experiences. As I show below, organizers craft an authentic underground experience with their diners via three main illusions: community, transparency, and gift-giving.

The Illusion of Community: Belonging and Exclusion

As described above, an underground restaurant experience was deemed authentic when it evoked the feelings of "a big warm dinner party" (Eng 2007) and guests enjoyed the "company of a community and forming part of a movement that is more community-oriented around eating" (Diner #20). This sense of community is, however, largely an illusion. Underground restaurants do not create community in the true sociological sense of the term. Rather, they promote an experience akin to "communitas": a brief and spontaneous state of camaraderie and equality arising when individuals share a common experience that is ritualistic and emotionally laden (e.g., a football game or a church service) (Turner 1969). Communitas can occur when guests, largely strangers, sit at a communal table and share food and alcohol over several hours, referring to one another by the end of the meal as friends, an experience summed up by one diner as a "friendship food one-night stand" (#7). This transient experience of community is interactive, succeeding when diners contribute their own experience. As a blogger observed, "[d]iners feel a sense of ownership over these meals that they create and succeed in creating a sense of place and community" (Friedman 2010). The intimacy of such a dinner "helps make diners feel like participants, not customers" (Kauffman 2011). For organizers, coperformance is the goal, a chef explained, "like we're making this experience happen together" (#64).

To promote such an ephemeral and illusionary form of community, however, producers and consumers must also address the tension between belonging and exclusion: organizers deploy material practices (e.g., communal tables, interactive activities) and cognitive

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strategies (e.g., liberally informing their communications with the rhetoric of community) that set the stage for interaction among their guests, whereas diners distance themselves cognitively from misbehaving tablemates.

Social Cohesion Strategies. Organizers set the stage for social interaction through rhetorical strategies that emphasize the creation of a communal atmosphere. Underground websites are littered with the language of community: "Food. Community. Love." greets visitors in large bold font on the website of one underground restaurant, whereas another advertises that "[we] provide you with an authentic, community-oriented dining experience." Because these statements appear online, they greet customers before they become diners and help foreshadow the social dining experience that will occur should they attend.

After diners arrive at an event, several material practices, such as homey settings with small communal tables, interactive activities, and at times, shared alcohol, promote the illusion of community. Communal tables were perhaps the most important tool for achieving a state of equality among diners, and a vast majority of the organizations studied arranged for their customers to dine communally. A chef described the motivation in the following way: "We want everyone to sort of come together and gather around the table, come together as one around the food" (#63). Moreover, with everyone receiving the same preset menu, strangers share the dining experience as equals. A few chefs went a step further and implemented assigned seating to encourage conversation and prevent repeat patrons from "becom[ing] complacent if they are always with the same people" (Chef #15).

The size of a communal table can also directly affect the illusion of community; although capacity is ultimately controlled by the physical limitations of a space, issues of authenticity are also relevant. When asked what the maximum number of people was for a comfortable dinner, patrons cautioned that an underground dinner with too many guests "loses its edge and authenticity" (#1). Producers were keenly aware of how the number of guests affected the dinner party atmosphere that they were curating. One of the Science Cuisine chefs explained, "The thing is, when you have that many guests, you almost don't get that interaction that you want with things like this. I think with 18 or 20 we still get a cozy, almost an intimate dining experience. When it is too many people you lose that sense of intimacy. . . . We still want this to be like a family dinner."

Like "family dinners," most underground restaurants operate out of personal homes. A homey atmosphere is important in creating an intimate and nonthreatening environment where patrons could more easily let their guards down and foster conversation with others. A diner explained the connection: "Most [dinners] take place in people's home[s]. That makes it a lot more personal and a lot more intimate and you really get to know something about people a lot more and I think it allows you to get to know people a lot more quickly too" (#20). For many underground restaurants, awareness to the microlevel details of a dinner is part of an orchestrated performance—crafting an environment conducive to communitas requires more than just setting up a communal table in someone's living room; it also requires a certain kind of aesthetic work that resembles a dinner party at a friend's home. A server highlighted this materiality of the dinner experience: "The chairs are rickety. . . . It's pretty kind of rustic and it's not fancy. . . . The silverware is mismatched. There may be chips on the plates. . . . It is a real tangible thing" (Org Member #13). These kinds of details were often intentional as a server explained in our conversation over Hidden Kitchen's choice to give diners kitchen towels to create a more rustic appeal:

> You have to create this illusion that even the stains on the napkins are orchestrated by you. . . . I think if you can do that, people will eat it up and think it is the most interesting and novel thing in the world. If you can't command it in that way then it just comes off sloppy. (Org Member #12)

When organizers fail to provide a homemade atmosphere with communal tables that lives up to diners' expectations of an intimate dinner party, guests can become disillusioned and quick to comment on the experience as unsophisticated. For example, a diner illustrated the unappetizing aesthetics of one underground restaurant that she attended:

> [At Underground Gourmet] he would serve on paper plates and make you bring your own plastic cups. It was a shtick and it was 50 or 80 bucks. That was not the least bit appealing. [The chef] was doing that as just a complete shtick. I decided that was an experience that I really didn't care for, because the underground or pop-up dinner was interesting as a concept but to sit on a floor eating on paper plates was not anything I needed to experience. (#6)

Although this dinner was participatory—it required diners to bring their own cups—it did not create the tailored homey ambience (and communal tables) that guests desired.

In addition to managing the physical atmosphere, organizers also used interactive activities and alcohol to promote feelings of togetherness among their diners. Most guests were strangers to one another, creating a potentially "awkward" social setting. This required small tricks to encourage engagement as a chef described: "It's not just like everyone shows up and sits down for dinner . . . for these events you kind of have to have something that is built in; people get to know

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each other before they eat together" (#42). For example, Hidden Kitchen had a successful Valentine's Day dinner where there was a pause between courses for diners to dance to live music and paint on bare walls with provided paint supplies.

More practically, alcohol could encourage conversation among strangers, and many organizers offered a mixed drink at the beginning of the meal, presented as a "gift" (although it was inadvertently paid for by guests as part of a set price), because in the words of one chef, for "the people who are nervous it takes a little bit of the edge off" (#57). A pre-dinner cocktail encouraged guests to mingle and socialize before taking their seats. At one Hidden Kitchen event where diners were especially untalkative, I observed the chef send out wine midway through the evening in a desperate attempt to promote interaction between guests. Additionally, because some underground restaurant meals require diners to bring their own alcoholic drinks ("BYO"), guests also worked to foster connections with one another by sharing alcohol with their tablemates. As one diner bluntly stated, "everybody has a better conversation with booze" (#6). Diners framed this generosity with alcohol as emblematic of the underground restaurant community. For example, a diner described one memorable meal where a tablemate shared a $600 bottle of scotch, remarking that "I think that sums up the average person going to dinner club" (#8).

Selecting and Excluding Participants. Producers seek to promote camaraderie via the strategies outlined above, but it is ultimately up to diners to engage with one another. Fellow guests could make or break an event, a fact of which producers were all too aware; as an underground chef reflected in an online forum: "Each party brings its own vibe to the meal. As much as the food attempts to take center stage, it's ultimately the diners that set the pace and feel for the evening" (Zupon 2006). Hence, success in fostering the illusion of community rested on diners' ability to become contributors and interact with one another agreeably.

Diners too were cognizant of their own—and others'—roles in supporting the illusion of community. For instance, when asked about the least enjoyable aspect of underground dining, nearly all guests mentioned their fellow diners. Not every dinner has ideal tablemates willing to share their expensive bottle of whiskey. Now and then, guests were incompatible and did not engage in communal discussion, a diner explained the following: "Sometimes the table just doesn't match, and it's just like you are sitting at the same table but you don't really interact, and that makes me feel a little bit awkward" (#3). More often, interviewees spoke of the "peril of the communal table," where "at some point you are going to get seated next to an asshole" (Diner #8). Here, sentiments that exude an "I am more of a foodie than you are" (Diner #16) air made up the most often cited source of blocked community by diners. I observed this behavior at several events. For example, at Science Cuisine, I watched a talkative guest dominate the small eight-person table's conversation, sharing her food adventures and knowledge and talking about eating lamb's brains and securing reservations at a Chicago restaurant known as particularly challenging to access.

Diners found this behavior distressing in part because of the physical proximity of guests at a shared table. Although such an arrangement was originally intended to promote a sense of belonging, it also placed guests in a uniquely intimate position, a diner explained,

> There is an intimacy to supper club, which is why the people who are annoying are annoying, because they are in this intimate space with you. Whereas in a restaurant, you can sort of block them out because the space is just different, there is an assumption of a wall. But [at an underground restaurant] it isn't. You are all in the space, so it's this weird combination of public and private. (#16)

As this excerpt illustrates, several diners cited guests who presented "annoying" behavior (#12, #14, and #16), preventing them from developing shared camaraderie during the dining experience or experiencing intimacy or belonging with their fellow tablemates. To manage this tension, diners often spoke of cognitive boundaries between appropriate (i.e., social) and inappropriate (i.e., insular) dinner conduct. For instance, patrons regularly cited the importance of proper dining etiquette in our interviews, explaining that eating at an underground restaurant was distinct from eating at a standard eatery—and that diners should recognize this difference before attending. One patron dictated: "Don't just come and hang out with the one friend or friends that you came with, because the whole point is to meet other people" (#20). Sociability was expected of anyone dining at an underground restaurant.

Organizers also worked to exclude insular guest behavior through a variety of membership-based tactics, for instance, operating with a referral-only model or using word-of-mouth advertising. Some went so far as to bar misbehaving individuals from attending future events, as a chef dryly explained: "We've had obnoxious people. They can't come back. End of story" (#10). These membership tactics also had the unintended effect of promoting feelings of belonging among the lucky guests on the "list," as a blogger wrote, "A supper club attendee has been chosen. Pre-selected. Almost vetted, really. So, the social implications of just being there and meeting other diners creates a bonhomie that no typical restaurant experience can match." By restricting attendance to members of select social networks, chefs attempted to mold groups of

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like-minded patrons (who also often shared socioeconomic status), hoping to ensure that when unfamiliar guests joined for dinner they would likely connect.

Hence, the illusionary experience of community—a fleeting emotional state of togetherness engendered among diners that is born out of sharing food and alcohol—requires diners to become participants in the illusion making. Although producers set the stage for social cohesion, they cannot ensure it, ultimately depending on diners to create their own performances of community—to share wine with tablemates and engage in conversation (see Table 3 for more examples illustrating the illusion of community).

The Illusion of Transparency: Hiding and Showing

Transparency in the cooking process was another key attraction of underground restaurants as a patron explained: "I always want to know when I am at a restaurant, like 'this is amazing! How was it done?' Here, you have someone who is skilled at his craft and is not holding anything back … kind of sharing it rather than hiding the ball" (#3). However, to provide the kind of transparency described by this diner, producers must hide elements of their organizational practice that might be perceived as incongruent in such a setting, finding the appropriate level of openness by revealing only certain elements of the production process. In other words, delivering the prized experience of transparency requires managing a continual tension between hiding and showing. Producers align their actions with consumers' expectations for organizational transparency: fine-tuned narratives that tell a backstory rather than candid monologues as well as accessible and visible chefs instead of quiet cooks retreating to the kitchen. Guests become cocreators of the illusion when they physically enter open kitchens, ask questions about the production process, and engage directly with chefs and cooks.

Framing the Experience. Storytelling is a critical tool that underground restaurants use to promote a sense of being granted access to a backstage domain typically hidden from view in standard restaurants. My observations and interviews revealed, however, that such openness was less often about sharing the realities of cooking than about deploying scripted and routinized narratives. For instance, at nearly every underground restaurant I observed, the chef(s) would start dinner with a spoken introduction. Below is an excerpt from my field notes at Saturday Dinners, which represents a stereotypical introductory presentation:

> The two chefs walk out to the dining room (which earlier today was Claire's living room) with beers in their hands. "Who is new?" Claire asks the twenty or so guests. Several people raise their hand in the audience. "Where are you from?" she asks. A diner proudly shouts out, "I drove the farthest! I'm from Bloomington, Indiana!" "Cheers!" Claire smiles, segueing to explain the history of "Saturday Dinners"; it has been going on for four and a half years, five in September, always here at her home. "We like to cook with seasonal food. All the farms are listed on the menu so if you want to get in contact with the farms you can." Claire ends her speech with an invitation, "Feel free to come into the kitchen; as they say, 'my home is your home!'"

This playful storytelling serves several purposes: it helps disseminate the organization's philosophy, establishes a social connection between the chefs and their diners, and encourages guests to engage with the transparency offered, most notably by physically entering the kitchen to observe the cooking process first hand. Although the excerpt above may seem improvisational, repeated observations revealed that introductory narratives were often routinized. Even consumers were aware of their repetitiveness. For instance, when I asked if there were any visible routines at dinners, a regular patron of the same underground restaurant, Saturday Dinners, cited the chefs' introduction, which he called "the bio":

> When [the chefs] come out and talk about where the food came from, that's part of the authenticity of their process; here's the farms that we got it from, here is what we are thinking. Instead of, you can read a menu, here is your damn food. Personalizing it more and again, telling little stories. You know, I have heard the bio now I don't know how many times and it is pretty much the same every time. But there are people in the room that have never heard it before, so I have to stop and say this isn't for me, this is for them. (#15)

Surprisingly, even when diners recognized the scripted nature of a chef's stories, they tolerated the routinized experience, going so far as to deem it authentic. This excerpt highlights the important role that patrons can play in recognizing the work that organizers put in to produce an illusionary experience. Here, the diner also contributes to sustaining the illusion when he cognitively embraces having to listen to "the bio" repeatedly, qualifying its scripted nature as a sort of communal sacrifice for new patrons: "this isn't for me, this is for them."

Over the course of a dinner, chefs and cooks continue to share information on food products and cooking techniques intertwined with personal stories about their lives. However, chefs were mindful in delivering this information.

> You want to make things seem special. If there was anything interesting or distinctive about the preparation or the ingredient, that's what I say. Rather than saying the same thing about everything, that's not that interesting. People can always tell what is in front of them. (#41)

As this excerpt notes, many organizers recognized the importance of conveying the appropriate type of

Table 3. The Illusion of Community—Examples

Social cohesion strategies
Social cohesion work
"Conversation turns to the guests downstairs. 'People are really tame down there,' a server remarks. 'There was one girl on her iPhone reading an article!' another server responds, shocked. I suggest that the crowd isn't as rowdy as the other nights because they are doing tea pairings instead of wine. The manager agrees, 'Yeah, alcohol is a social lubricant!' Shortly after, the chef sends some wine bottles down with the next course to help people relax." (Field Notes, Hidden Kitchen)
"A lot of supper clubs do the mismatched, different plates with different . . . random. There is a certain charm to it. So, we went to the charity shops and just shopped around for like items. We bought a couple of things." (Chef #1)
"Tip 6: Create community, not just yummy food. Beyond the delicious food and drink, elevate the experience by creating a sense of community at your event. Communal seating, group toasts, and icebreakers are all great ways to inspire diners to mix and mingle." (Eventbrite 2016)
Diner reactions—authenticity
"...that there was an entertainment component, a discussion component, having that I think is great. And then food, good food, and people sharing wine, people willing to open up. I always forget wine when I go there and people always end up sharing with me, I think it is so sweet, it's a real, like you are a stranger but I am willing to give you some of my wine anyways." (Diner #17)
"You know, the atmosphere was great, it was more intimate. More than anything you were really comfortable in talking to other people, complete strangers, and you listen to their stories . . . just nice talk in this nonthreatening environment, nicely paced dinner." (Diner #1)
Diner reactions—disillusionment
"Is by being underground in some manner more meaningful. . . . But what's underground dining being alternative to—rigid bourgeois notions of how rickety your table should be." (Gebert 2010)
"It's all folding chairs and you just kind of got your lights on and nothing on the walls. There is no refinement to this. They do zero about etiquette, which also blew me away. Just like basic etiquette of serving. . . . The price that they are charging for the food is basically what you are paying for fine dining and part of why people go to fine dining restaurants is really for the service experience and the atmosphere." (Diner #10)
Selecting and excluding participants
Selecting and excluding work
"We wanna weed out the douche-bags . . . I mean the people that complain about what's presented to them; what the menu is and why they're there. Because why they're there isn't actually the food; it's for social reasons and they're entirely missing the point. So, what we do is we ask on our reservation who referred you?" (Chef #50)
"I Google, I Facebook and I look at every single person who signs up [for dinner]." (Chef #4)
"Obviously, I would state that my number one rule is, it's a social event, interact with the people. Whether you like them or not, whether you find them boring or not. You can always move away at some point. . . . Number 2, don't be too shy. Which is saying talk!" (Diner #19)
Diner reactions—authenticity
"What I have grown to love about it is this sense of community that's built. I have met some really cool people there and it's really great to go to a dinner club and see people and be, like, I remember you from this one or whatever. You build this community of diners who believe in the same stuff that you believe in." (Diner #11)
"You all feel that you are there together, rather than at a restaurant where you got pods of 4, 2, 6 people that are all sort of completely socially isolated. . . . By the end of it everybody at the table is sort of more or less interacting [in] the same conversation. That is the kind of thing I think is neat, in that whether or not you actually know everybody there it does become the same social group." (Diner #22)
Diner reactions—authenticity
"You're familiar with the way it is set up, with communal tables? Inevitably when you are putting yourself into that situation, at some point you are going to get seated next to an asshole. (laughs) Or some horrible person. That has happened, certainly, not just once. That's the peril of the communal table. . . . There have been times where I have been seated next to people who have ruined my meal. Like no amount of booze or food was able to mitigate the dullness or the awfulness of their company." (Diner #8)
"I think there is always an asshole, who is, like, loud and drunk and thinks he knows more about food than anyone else in the entire place. It's that kind of, like, competition—I am more of a foodie than you are." (Diner #16)

information— "special" or "distinctive" facts about a meal rather than straightforward descriptions—to meet diners' expectations for a unique learning experience.

Conveying the appropriate kind of information required reframing the reality of cooking, which at times, was incompatible with the illusionary experience that organizers were working to create. This sort of reframing was illuminated in a conversation I had with a diner who once hosted an underground restaurant in her apartment and as a result, was given the rare opportunity to observe the real backstage operation.

> Respondent: . . . it's interesting to see how it all comes together. When you are at a dinner you just show up and everything is all put together. You don't see the chaos that goes into what happens when they leave the berries out and they are not in pristine condition for dinner and they have to scramble and come up with a different topping for their whatever. . . . Because we got to compare and we knew like when they came out to talk about the dessert, their *real* reason why they had to switch up on the second day because of what happened.
>
> Interviewer: They didn't say that?
>
> Respondent: No. Which was interesting! They weren't necessarily a hundred percent truthful. Though, with the diners they were just like, "oh we went to the market and these looked better!" [sarcastic tone] No! You left [the berries] out and they rotted in our kitchen! (#11)

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This excerpt shows how organizers can use storytelling to recast production mishaps in a positive light, which the informant here refers to as the "chaos," to maintain an aura of infallibility. By recalling her astonishment when she discovered that the chefs had not been completely "truthful" but instead, had fabricated a story to downplay a problem, the diner is surprised to learn of the elaborate performance taking place, but she remains pleased to have insider access to the real backstage operations. In fact, the informant goes on in our interview to applaud the chefs' ingenuity in dealing with the berry mishap: "[The chefs] are a well-oiled machine. You saw that, right? They have got everything down pat. They definitely worked it so they, when something happens, they know how to react" (#11).

Although this diner knew she would be privy to the real kitchen work as a host, sometimes when organizers fail to manage backstage activities appropriately, viewing them can be off-putting for diners. For instance, one diner expressed her displeasure in an online review: "[I was] really put off when I got up to go to the bathroom and saw all the [volunteer] servers sitting out in the hallway chowing on the same meal we were enjoying, except it didn't cost them $75" (H 2009). This critique highlights how important illusionary performances are even to the intimate insider domains that consumers may not regularly observe. This example also shows that disillusionment can occur over minor mishaps that reveal inconsistencies between reality and expectations. In short, most diners do not desire complete transparency in the production process, where volunteers are eating the diners' food or berries are left to rot, but instead, an illusionary version.

In another example, a disgruntled diner's online review emphasizes this desire to be sold illusionary stories rather than a chef's frank monologue:

> The chef's presentation was a bit much. I don't need to know that you haven't slept in three days, thanks. These kinds of events are all about illusion. Later on this kind of barking continued, and it would have been nice if the remarks were more enlightening (since she basically repeated what was already on the written menu). (C M 2012)

As this quote reveals, failure to produce the illusion of transparency can occur if chefs convey *too much* information. Conversely, revealing too little information was also viewed negatively. Another displeased diner complained online about how her experience at a foraging-themed dinner did not live up to expectations:

> [Z]ero info on how the food was foraged. A passing comment that some of the meat in the wild boar dish came from a boar the guy shot himself. How much? Probably a pretty small percent. If the staff is too busy to get into it, they should have at least included more details with the menu. . . . These are the things we paid $120 a head to experience. That sort of content would have completely offset the pace and shortcomings of some of the dishes. (S R 2011)

As these quotes imply, the content of stories matters, but so too does a producer's performance. Storytelling involves emotional work; more than simply talented chefs, organizers must be personable and charismatic when they convey their stories. For example, when I asked diners to describe negative experiences at underground restaurants, two separate interviewees cited the same organization, both because of what they felt was a lackluster performance on the part of the chef. Although the food was "really amazing" (#3), "the person serving was not the least bit charismatic, so it was really difficult to sit through" (#10). As this example indicates, it is not enough for the chef merely to tell diners what they are eating; he or she must do so in a gregarious, charming, and friendly way—however real or imagined.

Appearing Accessible. Crafting the illusion of transparency also requires that chefs be not only visible but also accessible. A guest explained the appeal: "having that access to people that were making a meal I thought was also really cool. . .here they are producing this amazing food and here I am this far away from them. I thought that was really awesome" (#11). Many of the chefs were cognizant that this accessibility is what differentiated underground dining as authentic compared with dining in traditional restaurants, as one chef explained: "[In a restaurant] the chef is hidden somewhere, they don't interact. It felt very fake and artificial and not honest, not genuine. . .So, in the beginning we wanted to create sort of a community base where the chef came in and joined the party" (#36). A hostess at Saturday Dinners summed up the appeal of accessibility:

> Diners have cultivated a relationship with the chefs, they can go into the kitchen. They have access, they are in someone's house. I just really think it is the access. It's the access to people who are creating the food. It's the intimacy of being in someone's house. (Org Member #13)

As this quote highlights, although homey décor helps promote the illusion of community, it can also create an aura of accessibility. Encouraging fluidity of movement between the traditional spaces of frontstage and backstage was key as a "how to" guide for underground restaurateurs dictated: "Break down 'the kitchen wall' by having the chef on the floor—or better yet, guests in the kitchen. An atmosphere of revelry and camaraderie is your goal" (Eventbrite 2016).

Open kitchens helped in particular to dismantle traditional barriers. For some chefs, an open kitchen was

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a necessity: "Part of the requirement for me to decide where I'm going to do my pop-ups; it has to have an open kitchen. It has to, I have to be able to at the very least make eye contact with the guests and have that interaction" (#27). Physical proximity between the kitchen and the dining room gave these interactions an intimate quality, as a chef explained: "People really feel intimately involved in the process. The kitchen is right there" (#14). The chef from Saturday Dinners emphasized the importance of the home environment in providing this accessibility:

> There are no barriers. I mean it's my kitchen and when the dinner is over people are free to walk around and come in the kitchen and talk to us and go on the back porch and just sit on my couch. It's a very relaxed environment, you feel comfortable to make friends and connect with us and feel comfortable talk to us just about food.

Although open kitchens have become increasingly common in standard restaurants, for the most part, they exude an exhibition quality—look but do not touch. In contrast, at underground restaurants, diners are encouraged to enter the kitchen, engage with the production of their food, and in the process, create personal connections with the chefs. Some establishments even have their diners play an active role in the creation of the meal: "people will come in and help me bring plates down . . . some people actually cook the main course!" (Chef #56). It is in these participatory moments that consumers become coperformers of the illusion of transparency.

Simply displaying the production process does not always, however, ensure that diners will engage with producers. Diners must feel comfortable enough to enter the kitchen and ask questions. For instance, one chef described in a disappointed tone the lack of engagement with his guests despite having an open kitchen:

> The kitchen is in the dining room so everybody's sitting there and I'm cooking. So, I'm listening to people's conversations and they can talk to me and approach me. They usually don't. A couple of people have. Very few people have. (#28)

As this excerpt suggests, consumers must be continually encouraged to coperform the illusion of transparency with producers. Some chefs did this by pulling chairs up to dinner tables at the end of the evening, typically with a drink in hand, for an informal "Q and A." Although even in traditional dining establishments, it is not unusual for a chef or maître d' to stop by a table to check in with diners, underground chefs and cooks engage with their guests in much more detailed and lengthy conversations, directly eliciting questions, much as a dinner party host would. When guests were able to give feedback directly to the chefs, they felt like contributors rather than just consumers as a diner reflected:

> We have been very lucky that, it seems that [the chefs] are receptive and they appreciate those comments. For them to ask, so what did you think? And actually want to hear something more than, yeah everything was great! It's kind of nice. Doesn't happen when you go to any restaurant. I mean, I wouldn't have the balls to say it if I was out anywhere else. (#11)

As these remarks underscore, these interactive moments were for many diners "the best part of the night" (M C 2011). Asking chefs and cooks about food preparations, requesting a copy of a recipe, or inquiring where to buy ingredients transformed diners into cocreators.

Having everyone "hang out in the kitchen … very much like your average party" (Diner #10), however, requires that producers navigate their authenticity work with the operation involved in cooking an elaborate multicourse menu out of a home kitchen. The constant desire that diners express to hear and see chefs throughout the dining experience can cause tension when organizers seek to retreat to the backstage domain to do the work necessary to pull off such a dinner. For instance, a sous-chef remarked, "I also love the interactions, like it is a very open kitchen kind of thing. Even though sometimes it can get frustrating where at the end of the dinner 12 people come into the kitchen while we are trying to clean" (Org Member #11). Organizers must manage patrons' high expectations regarding accessibility, a chef explained: "It is a fine act between keeping them moving and keeping the process going and not giving them the feeling that we are brushing them off, because they all want to chat" (#51). Some diners were aware of this challenge, as one guest reflected: "Some of the things that I try to be aware of is like, how much of [the chefs'] time I take. Because any amount of time of theirs that you take you are taking away from somebody else" (#12). As this quote illuminates, moments of chef interaction were a commodity that had to be shared across all the diners. This excerpt also reveals diners' cognizance of their role in upholding the experience for their fellow guests. However, more often, guests were disappointed when the chef was hidden, as a diner complained online: "[The chef] was friendly at first but then soon became distant and demonstrated some concerning service skills which you would absolutely not accept" (Pulledpork 2013).

Thus, delivering an illusionary experience of transparency requires that producers and consumers use cognitive and material techniques to simultaneously hide incompatible practices while showing the appropriate portion of organizational work (see Table 4 for more examples illustrating the illusion of transparency).

The Illusion of Gift-Giving: Donation and Compensation

Although the costs to diners at an underground restaurant mirror those of fine dining establishments—the

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Table 4. The Illusion of Transparency—Examples

Framing the experience

Storytelling

"Every two or three courses I'll get up and talk about the next courses and tell some little story or something, off-the-cuff type of stuff. I find myself repeating things though lately. Like I repeated this story the other day about this one time they were on this houseboat in Sausalito. And we sat everyone up on the deck and as the waves came in it like pushed the tables and things were falling off the side. People like that story because I've told it a few times. So just like interesting anecdotes. I just try to communicate why I'm excited about what's happening." (Chef #64)

"I tell people what's in it, if there was any sort of inspiration or idea behind it. . .I think you don't want to talk so much, especially because the food will get cold. I think people do kind of want to know what they are eating. But, I think [the diners] kind of like that informational aspect. It's nice hearing the chef actually talk about the food, you don't get to see that in the restaurant." (Chef #41)

"The first dinner I remember getting up and welcoming everyone and saying 'thanks for coming' and 'enjoy the dinner' and afterwards someone said to me 'it would have been nice if you had talked a little bit more about the food, why you chose to do this menu.' I realized, yeah people want to know that." (Chef #13)

Diner reactions—authenticity

"Every dish that comes out, the chef will talk about why he created that, what was his inspiration and what was in it. . . . That I think has been very nice, very good experience." (Diner #13)

"Everything has a story. You get a little bit of their personal life in everything and part of that is that they come out at the beginning of the whole dinner and they talk about themselves. . . . You feel instantly exclusive and welcome and kind of cozy." (Diner #10)

"One of the things that I particularly like about [Underground Restaurant] is that they come out and they explain each course and that I feel really goes a long way as to getting what they were up to. Why did they put all this stuff together? You don't get [that] in a restaurant. Chefs never come out and go I did this because of this." (Diner #22)

Diner reactions—disillusionment

"Then [an] hour wait for the main course, I think it was a grilled dry rubbed beef tenderloin served with a grilled salad. . . . Again nobody bothered telling us what we were eating! I got two small cuts, some got three, some got a second serving—no rhyme or reason why." (Chase 2010)

"I surprised my husband with [a Secret Culinary] event for Valentine's called "One Night in Paris." I was hoping for an experience similar to one we had had in Berlin a few months ago. A private intimate evening of delish food and drinks, but instead we ended up at a mini wedding party with too many people and mass catered food. I really wanted it to be an evening to remember in a positive way, but for $240 it was nothing more than bad wedding food . . . for that amount of money we could have at least had real napkins." (M P 2010)

Appearing accessible

One on one engagement and open kitchens

"I think in restaurants there is a big disconnect between the kitchen and the people who are eating the food. Which is why I really sort of like the open kitchen that some places are having now. I love it because your dining experience is also part of the kitchen. And that is what we try to bring to [the underground restaurant]." (Chef #63)

"Usually what I will do is after the main course I will sit with them. So usually I will just pull up a chair, and I will have a banter. Because, first thing first, it is meant to be social. . . . End of the day you are there for the company. Or, you could just order take away." (Chef #56)

"Mary and Sam come out to the dining room to join the guests, who are finishing dessert. They each grab a chair and sit at opposite ends of the table. 'So how was everything?' Mary asks. 'It was great,' we all say in unison while lightly applauding. Diners begin to ask a number of questions: 'Where did they procure ingredients? Do they grow anything themselves? How did they prepare that mushroom gravy?' Mary politely answers each question one by one. 'Okay, any other suggestions?' she asks. Rob, a regular, recommends, 'Yea, you could freeze the vacuum compressed pear in the Bellini's.' Mary nods her head, 'Oh actually that is a good one, yeah we will do that next time.'" (Field Notes, Science Cuisine)

"The most enjoyable part for me was working hard, getting the food out and sitting down after the meal with everyone at the tables. I'd just go and walk around and talk with groups of people at the tables, get their feedback, you know really have a nice rapport with them." (Chef #30)

Diner reactions—authenticity

"I loved being able to get up and wander over into the kitchen to watch [the chef] and his team of volunteers prepping our meal and to get a sneak peek on what was coming out next." (T E 2012)

"[The chef] and his team are really friendly, and extremely well organized. Don't let the food fool you, the atmosphere is actually quite relaxed and although busy making dinner, [he] came out multiple times to check in on us and answered any questions we had. He has a passion for the dishes he creates, and that's shown throughout all the courses." (T J 2010)

"Perhaps the best part of the night, however, is when they were finally done serving and joined us for wine and discussion in dining room." (M C 2011)

But, what's also nice about it is that [the chefs] invite people back into the kitchen. If you have concerns about whether there are rodents running around, you are welcome to go back there and take a look. Which is also a cool part about the whole thing." (Diner #10)

Diner reactions—disillusionment

"[The chef] is very sort of soft spoken and she explains the food very quickly, very quietly, and doesn't give a lot of explanation . . . she gives less of the sort of personality and interaction than some of the other folks do." (Diner #3)

"Oh, and despite what the website says, the chef does not come by and tell you about the ingredients and where they were foraged. Meh." (C J 2012)

average price of a dinner in my sample (between 2010 and 2013) was $70, but it can run upward of $125 or more depending on the chef's reputation and menu offerings—the pecuniary symbols ingrained in standard dining settings (i.e., prices on menus, bills presented at the end of a meal, and tipping norms) are missing from an

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underground dining experience. Instead, underground restaurants promote a form a payment that is akin to a gift-giving event, much like at a dinner party where the host offers guests a meal while guests often contribute bottles of wine. However, unlike a dinner party, the financial exchange involved in an underground restaurant does not completely disappear. Instead, organizers downplay and distract from economic transactions via material and cognitive earmarking strategies, such as distributing discrete envelopes for payment or encouraging tipping through small host gifts. To uphold the illusion of gift-giving, consumers must also play their part (for instance, by bringing beer instead of cash for a tip or downplaying the financial exchange in their minds to sustain their illusionary desires).

For example, instead of handing diners a bill when meals were completed, organizers either left discrete envelopes for cash payments on site (a little over one-half of the organizations in the sample) or solicited advance payments online (just under one-half of organizations in the sample). These material acts of underplaying payment were often performed intentionally as a chef explained:

> We try to have everyone bring cash only. What we do is at the end of the meal we pass out envelopes and pens and put them on the table. Just write your name on the envelope, we appreciate your donation, whatever you can give.... Because you have 32 people, what are you going to do, walk around with your money belt and say "give me your money"? Tacky. You don't want people paying with checks, so leave the money on the table. Whatever you want to pay. (#13)

As this excerpt indicates, many producers were cognizant of the messages that they sent diners, and language associated with "donations" was commonplace. Moreover, providing envelopes with pens also enabled consumers to transform a payment transaction into an expression of gratitude, and I observed diners using such blank envelopes to store their cash and write what the Hidden Kitchen chef would call "love notes." The irony, of course, is that asking for payment at the end of the meal is exactly what a standard restaurant does. However, as this chef's quote indicates, such economic activities are incompatible with the desired experience of a dinner party (as she notes, asking for money is "tacky"), and accordingly, they are designed to be as discreet as possible.

Another technique used by just under one-half of the restaurants in the sample to deemphasize the financial transaction was through prepayment on an online ticketing platform. Chefs suggested that prepayment shifted diners' expectations from the traditional commercial transaction that occurs in a brick-and-mortar restaurant to an informal atmosphere as the chefs of Saturday Dinners explained:

> Claire: There's no sort of like, there is no set parameters. When you come into a restaurant there is sort of a process you go through—you are seated, you're fed, you pay, you leave and it's like this is completely the opposite of that.
>
> James: Actually, we don't even transact money on site.... So, people pay ahead of time, we have PayPal and so it ends up being this experience that when they walk in they don't even end up needing to bring money with them, um, because they have already paid.

Here, the two chefs engage in cognitive boundary work, distancing their payment strategies from the implied rigidly transactional nature of traditional restaurants. However, this framing is incongruous with the reality that they are simply reversing the dining process: guests pay, are seated, fed, and then leave. By shifting the order of events, the chefs make the necessary financial exchange less public and easier to complete.

Interviews with diners revealed that several were also aware of these financial earmarking techniques (Zelizer 1997), recognizing the power of prepayment to foster a feeling like that of attending a friend's dinner party. Guests drew sharp boundaries between their underground experiences and payment expected at restaurants, echoing the language of the producers.

> It helps that [with] a lot of these experiences, the money is always taken care of. The money is not in the equation the day of the dinner, all you have to worry about is eating, drinking, and getting yourself home. So, you are already more relaxed. I think people sometimes forget that little stab of reality in a dining experience.... You have this kind of reckoning with reality when the check comes. And even if it's handled elegantly and classily.... There is still this unspoken discussion, money has just changed hands and that no matter what, clearly this whole evening has been a transaction of sorts, but with any sort of prepaid thing you don't have that intrusiveness of that whole transactional reality in your dining experience and so it becomes much more about the *gift* of the food.... If you don't ever see money, you might be thinking about it but if you don't actually ever see it there is no physical reckoning of the cost of your meal at the time you are eating. So, the illusion of the dinner party becomes even greater. It's just a lot cozier and more congenial. (#8)

What is striking about this quote is that, in other prepaid experiential settings—for example, purchasing a ticket for a concert or the theater—individuals rarely frame the event that is staged after prepayment as a "gift." This contradiction reveals that organizers are not the only performers in the illusion of gift-giving; diners too engage in cognitive boundary work to promote the illusion for themselves. Although diners

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are unlikely to forget how much they spent on the meal (indeed, when they have a poor dining experience, they remember the price all too well, as cited by the diner above who stumbled on volunteers eating the same meal), they seek to harmonize any dissonance between reality and illusions by cognitively downplaying payment so that it is consistent with their illusionary expectations. Similarly, another diner engaged in this cognitive work when she justified the producers' financial motives by describing the presentation of the meal as "a commercial venture obviously, for profit. But, they are trying to do that in a sense that feels a little more home-ish" (#22). Again, here, we see a diner who is cognizant of the reality (i.e., this is a financial transaction) while prioritizing the illusion that underground restaurants offer (i.e., this is a different *kind* of transaction).

Finally, participatory tipping policies, whereby producers suggest that patrons bring small host gifts instead of leaving cash tips, reframed the economic transaction by replacing it with more socially acceptable practices. A chef blogged her philosophy on gratuities: "A small gift is welcome; after all you are going to their home. Most supper club hosts are intensely interested in food and drink so if you make, say, jam or liqueur then give a jar rather than a tip." Just as you might bring your dinner party host a bottle of wine, diners could also bring organizers a small token. Consider, for instance, the following email invitation:

> We by no means ever expect gratuity, nor do we require it. But should you feel compelled to leave us a little something[,] you may do so at the end of the dinner, but please don't feel obligated. That said, [we] wholeheartedly accept tasty bottled beverages in appreciation of our efforts.

At this underground restaurant, I regularly observed patrons drop off beer as a gratuity for the kitchen staff. Such gifting practices were participatory for diners, who had to do more than simply hand over a cash tip. They had to spend time searching for the appropriate gift and engaging directly with producers—for example, physically entering the kitchen—to hand them over (indeed, patrons discussed agonizing over which beer to purchase for the chefs' palates, concerned about making a positive impression).

Some patrons are, of course, more critical of the illusionary experience that underground restaurants provide. For instance, a food critic, whose very job it is to analyze the dining experience in great detail, spoke of his disillusionment with attending underground restaurants, citing the real economic transaction taking place.

> This is not to demean them, I think these guys are doing some interesting things, but they are basically catering dinners! They are either renting a hall or they are finding a friend who has a big enough house and they are doing a catered dinner. The only difference is that at normal catered dinners the host would pay the caterer and then he would have guests over. But in this case, the guests are paying. The cost is spread out. [Laughs.] I think the whole underground attitude is, to some extent, and I use this term lovingly—it's bogus. It's bogus in the sense of it's somewhat manufactured and artificial and marketing driven rather than a reflection of the actual realities. (#2)

As this interview quote highlights, when diners are less willing to buy into the coperformance of the illusion of gift-giving, they reframe the experience through an economic lens. More broadly, as seen in earlier excerpts, when diners are disillusioned, they often cite the cost of the meal, such as when there is not enough or too much transparency offered, suggesting that diners never completely forget about the economic transaction in which they are partaking.

There are times at which organizers themselves fail to sustain their role in the coperformance of the gift illusion. Thus far, I have presented organizers largely as fundamentally savvy and intentional in downplaying inconsistencies, but I also observed cases at the other extreme, where actors sincerely believed that their exaggerations were, in fact, reality. For instance, some organizers were so convinced by their own impression of reality—that they were truly offering a gift of food—that they saw prepayment as incompatible for the setting, as one chef explained: "Other people use websites where you pay … I don't really like that. I think it's still a dinner party and not an event, like a commercial event" (#62). Although other establishments used discreet forms of soliciting cash (e.g., using an envelope for diners to stash their money and write feedback on as cited above), these organizers simply expected the diners to leave cash on the table or by hand unsolicited. However, this direct form of payment fostered feelings of uneasiness among diners, because they framed it as incompatible within the setting of underground dining.

> At [Science Cuisine] and [other underground restaurants] it just sort of seems weird to hand over cash, there's just something about that experience, it's not something that you do in any other context. You never go to a restaurant and just hand them a wad of cash. I think there is some discomfort in that financial transaction aspect of it. So, maybe like tacking on a tip to that would make it even more uncomfortable, at least for me. (#3)

Although handing over a "wad of cash" is exactly what one does after one has eaten out (although perhaps indirectly, with a credit card), this diner frames the experience of direct payment at underground restaurants as foreign or antithetical, because such actions do not align with the illusionary experience of the meal as a gift that the diner expects. The two underground restaurants referenced in this excerpt were

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problematic for patrons, because they did not inconspicuously solicit payment, such as through envelopes, but instead, avoided the topic entirely other than an email confirmation before the dinner where the chef reminded guests of the donation. My repeated observations at Science Cuisine, one of the establishments that this informant cites, showed that most diners were uncomfortable at the end of the meal, seeking direction from other attendees to indicate how they should pay, whether they should tip, and if so, how much.[1] The unease that this diner expresses is also in part because of the physical home-like environment of underground restaurants, which can have a powerful impact on diners' perceptions of what types of economic transactions are acceptable for the space. For instance, a diner explained that this was "because it is not a restaurant and you are in somebody's home and you are not used to being a guest in somebody's house and having to compute 20 percent in your head" (#8). One diner interviewed was so swept up in the experience at a chef's personal home that she forgot to pay and had to later mail the cash (#20).

Consequently, the illusion of a gifted meal requires more than just downplaying financial transactions. It also requires earmarking such transactions appropriately to align with the home setting of underground restaurants. To uphold the illusion of gift-giving, then, organizers must also actively engage diners in earmarking economic transactions, encouraging them to bring gifts instead of cash tips or inviting them to provide feedback on envelopes meant to discreetly hide payment (see Table 5 for supplementary examples illustrating the illusion of gift-giving).

Comparing Illusionary Claim-Making

Although I have presented each of the three authenticity-related illusions separately, they do not operate entirely independent of one another. The illusions of community, transparency, and gift-giving share several characteristics: they are all characterized by tensions between reality and fantasy that are negotiated through a combination of material and cognitive tools. These tools can overlap with one another, which they do when the aesthetics of home simultaneously support the illusions of community and transparency. Moreover, all three illusions depend on the willingness of audience members and organizers to be involved in constructing them locally. If one party is not eager to coconspire—if, for example, a diner refuses to socialize with others or a chef is uncomfortable asking for money—then some form of discord may occur.

The three illusions also differ in form and function. Although all three require motivated participants, each requires distinct levels of involvement from consumers and producers. For instance, the illusion of community depends largely on diners' willingness to socialize with their tablemates through conversation while sharing food and alcohol. Producers can set the stage for fraternizing, but ultimately, the successful coperformance of the illusion of community is at the mercy of the diners who are present on a given evening. This perhaps explains why the illusion of community is more likely to fail (indeed, when asked for moments of disappointment, interviewees often cited their tablemates' behaviors), which can be risky for organizers attempting to orchestrate an authentic dinner party vibe. In contrast, establishing the illusions

Table 5. The Illusion of Gift-Giving—Examples

Donation and compensation
Donation and compensation work
"Eight in ten (80%) pop-up event attendees say they actually prefer to buy tickets in advance rather than pay at the end of the meal. It creates a more relaxing environment for both the guests and the chef, so that the day of can be all about the food." (Eventbrite 2015)
"So, we are going to go ahead and serve the first course, please hold onto your silverware through the night. Also, there are some envelopes for each of you, this is for gratuity if you want to leave some and any love notes or comments you may have." (Field Notes, Hidden Kitchen)
"For example, last Sunday everybody brought a gift—so it was Chinese folks … they brought me some dim sum because they know I love those and um, this table here brought me wine. A lot of people just, it's just like a family. It's just great." (Chef #6)
Diner reactions—authenticity
"The prix fixe part of it is great for me. And the prepay makes sense. You know, you are not in a formal environment. You are not in an institution." (Diner #12)
As we clean up I walk to each table and collect the small brown envelopes left for tips. Guests are given pens to write feedback on the envelopes. I pick up an envelope that reads: "Thank you so much for a wonderful meal; we made a family tonight which is what [Hidden Kitchen] does best! Love, Underground Supper Clubbers." (Field Notes, Hidden Kitchen)
Diner reactions—disillusionment
"Throw in the bill, though, and not everyone's so keen on the concept. 'I like the idea in so many ways, but then just when I think I'm sold on it, I think, they're just charging for a dinner party,' says one Manhattan male foodie. They're just covering costs, advocated another." (Huhn 2007)
"You asked earlier about things that could be improved—that is something that I think if supper clubs made it clearer, like how practically the financial piece is going to work, that might make people more comfortable. … Here is an envelope to pass around at the end of dinner and put in whatever you want in it. Because that's the awkward piece of it." (Diner #3)

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of transparency and gift-giving entail more producer-driven initiatives. To create these experiences, organizers help direct guests in their coperforming role (e.g., inviting diners into the kitchen to watch the production process; informing guests when they can ask questions, such as at the end of the meal; or instructing diners to write feedback on envelopes used for payment). Organizers also engage in more routinized behavior to deliver the illusions of transparency and gift-giving, which they show, for example, when deploying scripted narratives and language.

The three illusions work together to convey distinct aspects of the dinner party fantasy: eating dinner together with friends (community), "hanging out" in the host's kitchen (transparency), and enjoying a homemade meal (gift-giving). Although these illusions complement one another, the presence of all three is not necessarily a requisite to establishing a claim of authenticity. This is in part because consumers vary in the extent to which they attribute weight to each illusion in the successful coperformance of the authentic experience of a dinner party. Moreover, the weight that each illusion assumes relative to that of the other two depends on the approach taken by the organization at hand and whoever is in attendance that evening, suggesting the broader importance of joint production in mediating multiple illusionary values.

Discussion

This article began with a key challenge for organizations engaging in authenticity work: How can they claim authenticity in a way that aligns with audience members' varied and shifting expectations? Through a qualitative inductive study of underground restaurants, I found that the answer to this question is in the coperformance of illusions. Underground restaurants coperform three illusions with their diners when claiming authenticity: First, organizers set the stage for the illusion of community via social cohesion tactics that nudge diners, initially strangers, to engage with one another over shared food and alcohol and build ephemeral feelings of camaraderie and togetherness. Second, organizers engage diners in an illusionary experience of transparency. Using material and cognitive techniques, underground organizers selectively reveal elements of the production process while downplaying and distracting from activities that diners might see as incompatible with openness (e.g., fine tuned narratives that tell a backstory rather than candid monologues). Third, organizers use alternative payment methods to promote the illusion of gift-giving and downplay the commercial nature of the transaction. When diners engage socially with their tablemates, ask questions, spend time in open kitchens, and bring gifts instead of monetary tips, they become *co-conspirators* in these illusions.

These findings contribute to the literature on organizational authenticity by (1) identifying all of the participants in authenticity performances and (2) revealing the critical role that coproducing illusions plays in generating authenticity. These contributions have implications for how scholars think about authenticity work more generally, focusing attention on the actors that we consider when studying such claim-making, the means through which producers accomplish it, and the kinds of boundary conditions that are inherent to the process. In short, this study indicates that authenticity requires more complex tactics than would be involved if organizers could establish it simply by making one-way claims that audiences must either passively accept or reject. Instead, these findings show that manufacturing authenticity is a *process* that involves the active co-construction of meaning, often of an illusionary nature, by both organizers and their audiences. Below, I discuss in greater detail these two contributions and their implications.

Focusing on the participants in authenticity performances highlights the diverse motivations, ambitions, and interests of these various actors and the effect that they have on the process of claiming authenticity. As argued in prior research, the consumption of authenticity often depends on an actors' personal goals, which can influence the products that he or she perceives as authentic and seeks out (Beverland and Farrelly 2009); for example, it has been found that elites pursuing status seek types of authenticity in the goods that they purchase that differ from what counts as authenticity to individuals of lower socioeconomic status (Holt 2000, Johnston and Baumann 2010, Baumann et al. 2017, Hahl et al. 2017). Based on observations of and interviews with individuals who produce and consume authenticity in underground restaurants, this study suggests that it is the *alignment* of multiple actors' motivations that is key to resolving the challenges that come with authenticity work. Both parties—producers and audience members—must be motivated by the same goal (i.e., establishing the illusion) if authenticity claims are to succeed.

At times, however, actors' motivations may be misaligned. This study reveals that the cognizance with which actors participate in their own illusionary productions falls along a spectrum—many were aware, but some producers were taken in by their own acting and seemed sincerely convinced that the illusions of community, transparency, and gift-giving were a reality. For example, a few underground organizers did not want to earmark payments, because they felt that this would somehow be more deceptive than simply handing a bill to a guest. At times, self-illusion can be powerful (Goffman 1959), but in this setting, underground producers' motivations were at times misaligned with consumers' expectations for a more

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artificial experience, such as they were when a chef was openly transparent in her storytelling but a diner wanted to hear a more refined illusionary narrative. Conversely, consumers may be offered an illusion but prefer not to play a role in its construction. For instance, a food critic, whose very role it was to distance himself from the experience so that he could evaluate it objectively, compared underground dinners with catering, using the term "bogus" to describe the producer's motives. To take another example, I observed diners who did not want to engage with fellow guests to share a meal and thereby, made it difficult to create an illusion of community. This suggests that consumers can reject the coproducer role.

The case of misaligned actors reveals a boundary condition of authenticity work: actors may not always be willing to play their part. Ultimately, authenticity is a construct that requires social agreement (Peterson 1997). This means that organizations can exercise only so much control over the process of crafting authenticity—they cannot force their audience members to play along with all of the manufactured messages that they produce, and they cannot expect an audience to simply accept their claims. The problem of misaligned motivations may be more common in emerging industries or new organizational forms, such as underground restaurants, where expectations of authenticity have yet to coalesce at the field level. For example, in the early 1920s, as country music was still nascent, there were several contested versions of what counted as authentic for the genre; by the 1950s, however, a shared understanding had emerged, and the signifiers of authenticity within the field had become institutionalized (Peterson 1997). Accordingly, more empirical work is needed to explain cases where actors' goals for authenticity are misaligned and how such misalignment may account for potential failures of authenticity. This study is subject to the limitation that it studied mostly successful examples of coperformed illusions, which gave authenticity mostly positive connotations. Future research could investigate cases in which the diverse set of interacting stakeholders who play a role in authenticity claim-making (e.g., individual critics and experts, regulators, and policymakers) collaborate in harmony and compare them with other cases in which they are in discordance. For example, in cases of discordance, there can be dramatic consequences, such as business failure (Turco 2012). It is important to understand the implications of these differences for a product's or producer's perceived authenticity.

This study makes a second contribution by highlighting the critical role of coperforming illusions in the crafting of authenticity. The growing trend toward accepting, and even rewarding, the contrived and invented as authentic has been cited across a variety of domains, such as tourism (e.g., Sherlock Holmes' London "home") (Grayson and Martinec 2004), reality TV (Rose and Wood 2005), sales of products based on national identity (e.g., Scottish tartans) (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012), and political campaigns (Hahl et al. 2018). Illusions can become so powerful in domains of authenticity that the illusionary experience or product replaces the real one: in the Thai handicraft market that Wherry (2006) studied, over time, the fake spirit houses sold as tourist souvenirs became so much more common than the original religious ones that the souvenir versions began to be perceived as the truly authentic spirit houses. As this final example illustrates, prior scholarship has identified a top-down approach to the creation of illusions: producers invent goods, and consumers unreflexively seek them out and perceive them as authentic (Baudrillard 1983).

In contrast, this study suggests that it is not illusions per se that consumers seek out but instead, their coproduction, even going as far as to seek out experiences where they can be active participants in the illusion making. The consumers that I observed in this study were not cultural dopes who cannot tell the difference between fantasy and reality (Grayson and Martinec 2004) but rather, actors who are, for the most part, cognizant of and active coconspirators in creating illusions. Accordingly, if an organization is to some extent deceiving its audiences in upholding what it claims to be an authentic identity, audience members knowledgeably deceive themselves in perpetuating such authenticity. For instance, many underground restaurant patrons are remarkably self-aware of the illusions that they are consuming (and helping to produce). Diners know, for example, that nearly all of the guests that they label as "friends" at the underground communal table remain strangers at the end of the night; that their "hosts" are hardworking chefs and not chums; and that, despite the practice of labeling their payments donations, they will pay for their meals as surely as they would in a standard restaurant transaction.

Consumers may be more willing to accept such inconsistencies from organizations, because coproducing an illusion supports their *self-authentication* (Arnould and Price 2000, Beverland and Farrelly 2009). As a result, to ensure the successful creation of their own authenticity, consumers are self-motivated to suspend disbelief and selectively process information (Beverland and Farrelly 2009). For example, one diner cited in the findings understood that the prepayment for his meal was an organizational tactic, but he realigned it cognitively to fit the narrative of the gift-giving illusion that he desired. This cognitive effort on the part of consumers to sustain illusions has also been cited in tourism, such as when tourists are mindful that they are experiencing a managed version of a place but selectively ignore evidence of commercial tourism—think of kitschy

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souvenirs—to reconcile the experience as authentic (Cohen 1988).

For an organization, jointly producing illusions when crafting authenticity can also enhance its relationships with internal and external members. Within a firm, coproduction between workers and managers can support an enduring illusory organizational identity (Anteby and Molnar 2012). Within a business-consumer relationship, coproducing illusions can imbue audience members with a stronger sense of meaning and attachment to an organization, in part because crafting illusions depends on interpersonal interactions (for example, one-on-one engagement between cooks and diners) that transform a transactional service into something resembling a meeting with friends, heightening the organization's authenticity (Arnould and Price 1993). However, coproducing illusions also has implications for contemporary organizations in that they must seem real while offering the right kind of imaginary experience (Grazian 2010). Therefore, to encourage the coproduction of "inauthentic authenticity," firms must skillfully motivate and induce their consumers to also become participants in shaping their own experiences (Gilmore and Pine 2007). As noted in the introduction, the boundary between acceptable and excessive engagement in the claiming of authenticity is challenging to pull off.

Finally, as Peterson (2005, p. 1086) noted, "authenticity is not equally important in all contexts," and not all organizations will need—or want—to coproduce illusions to instill perceptions of authenticity. This study found that authenticity is often discursively negotiated across the boundaries where customers and producers interact, suggesting that the joint production of illusions may be more common to experience-based settings, which are characterized and valued by their interactive nature over product qualities alone. For instance, in the leisure service industries, the appeal of experiential spaces that actively involve consumers as participants in the performance of illusions is growing steadily. In the blues clubs of Chicago, for example, young black performers regularly engage audience members with manufactured caricatures that conform to visitors' idealized expectations of urban nightlife (Grazian 2003). To consider extreme examples, cult repeat performances of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Star Trek* conferences, and Civil War enactments all gain their authenticity when audience members act out and embody fictional characters.

Tourism is another experience-based setting where coproduced illusions are common, such as in river rafting, where tourists intimately engage with guides to create idealized bonds of friendship that disappear after the rafting experience ends (much like the illusion of community within underground restaurants) (Arnould and Price 1993). Similarly, at reconstructed historic sites, such as Colonial Williamsburg and Lincoln's New Salem Village, tourists coproduce a simulated version of reality by asking questions and interacting with their tour guides (Bruner 1994). Even in the educational setting, students and faculty regularly work together to coproduce an illusory authentic ethical identity (Anteby 2013). These examples are particularly illustrative of our future; some scholars have suggested that we have now entered an "experience economy," whereby traditional industries are becoming increasingly experiential (Pine and Gilmore 2011).

Conclusion

This study has explored how organizations navigate the challenges involved in making one of the most powerful identity claims in contemporary culture: that of authenticity. Although the prior literature may propose that the locus of authenticity is in strategic organizations that make one-way claims that are then passively accepted or rejected by consumers, this study suggests otherwise: producers and consumers jointly mediate meanings of authenticity through an active process of coperforming illusions.

Authenticity work is a continual, reiterative, and ongoing process—a struggle between multiple participants with varying motivations who must regularly reach agreement on the illusion that they are jointly producing. As Gubrium and Holstein (2009, p. 123) observe, "there is no 'time out' from the task of conveying or discerning authenticity if one seeks to be credible." Thus, when viewing authenticity claiming as a joint process, investigating authenticity work requires that scholars study how organizations and their audience members mediate conflicting sensibilities and juggle the illusions of supporting authenticity.

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Endnote

[1] This discomfort over the financial transaction may have influenced Science Cuisine's lack of success in comparison with the other two field sites that I observed—the two chefs closed their underground restaurant after just over a year in business, citing insufficient demand (indeed, many dinners were cancelled at the last minute because of having too few diners sign up).

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