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From the ‘Mad Dash’ to ‘Shopping Alone’: Thanksgiving Rituals of Consumption on Black Friday and Cyber Monday

Abstract. There are many longstanding customs associated with the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States — established by an Act of Congress in 1941 as the fourth Thursday in November — such as family feasts, spectatorship of Thanksgiving parades and/or football games, and travel home. Traditions associated with the day following Thanksgiving — known as Black Friday — are typically rituals of consumption that mark the unofficial start of the Christmas holiday (and shopping) season: extended hours at shopping malls, special promotions announced in stores or advertised in advance, and mad dashes (sometimes known as ‘great races’) when the stores first open. This article uses two folkloristic frameworks to analyse the customary behavior of Black Friday participants, as revealed through interviews conducted with shoppers. One framework identifies these shopping customs as ritualistic; the other employs Joseph Campbell’s monomyth theory to describe the shoppers’ participation as an adventure. Posing one threat to Black Friday’s future are attempts to regulate the mad dash, particularly after a Wal-Mart employee was crushed to death by crowds in 2008. Even more existentially threatening is Cyber Monday, when people are shopping for bargains online while ostensibly back at work. Cyber Monday’s increasing popularity suggests that consumers may prefer shopping alone with mobile technology instead of the more social experience of shopping together in a superstore on Black Friday.

Keywords: consumer spending, monomyth theory, rituals, shopping, social networking, Thanksgiving Day

There are many longstanding customs associated with Thanksgiving Day in the United States, including rituals of feasting that traditionally feature stuffed turkey, cranberries, and pumpkin pie (as illustrated in Norman Rockwell’s famous *Saturday Evening Post* cover,

for example);¹ spectatorship of Thanksgiving parades and/or football games (both collegiate and professional); and journeys (Thanksgiving is the nation's busiest weekend for travel, according to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics).² There are also customs of more recent origin associated with the day following Thanksgiving, known as Black Friday, which now marks the unofficial start of the Christmas shopping season. Black Friday customs include extended hours at shopping malls, special promotions announced in stores or advertised in advance, and mad dashes (sometimes known as 'great races') when the stores first open their doors to the public. To enhance the competitiveness of Black Friday shopping, some of those special sales are starting earlier and earlier, or are creating ever more frenzied shoppers, which in turn has sparked both criticism and regulatory controls. However, what may be even more threatening to Black Friday customs is the rise of Cyber Monday, when people are shopping online for bargains after the Thanksgiving weekend. This article will explore some rituals of consumption associated with the extended Thanksgiving holiday, some attempts to regulate those customs, and some implications for the future.

Until 26 December 1941, when the U.S. Congress formally established the fourth Thursday in November as the holiday, Thanksgiving was a moveable feast.³ What we now think of as the first Thanksgiving probably took place in September or October 1621 to coincide with the first harvest of the Pilgrims in Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts.⁴ In October 1863, during the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln declared the holiday as the final Thursday of November. It remained so until November 1939 (which contained five Thursdays). Still fighting the 1930s Depression, anxious retailers and business leaders asked

¹ Patrick Perry, 'Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms', *Saturday Evening Post*, 1 January 2009, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2009/01/rockwells-four-freedoms> [accessed 17 May 2020]. The Rockwell painting, titled 'Freedom from Want', appeared on the magazine cover dated 1 March 1943.

² US Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 'U.S. Holiday Travel', 20 May 2017, https://www.bts.gov/archive/publications/america_on_the_go/us_holiday_travel/entire [accessed 17 May 2020].

³ Tanya Ballard Brown, 'How Did Thanksgiving End Up on the Fourth Thursday?', *National Public Radio*, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/11/21/165655925/how-did-thanksgiving-end-up-on-thursday> [accessed 17 May 2020].

⁴ Hennig Cohen and Tristram Potter Coffin (eds.), *The Folklore of American Holidays* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1987), p. 331.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt to move the Thanksgiving holiday one week earlier — to the fourth, rather than the fifth Thursday — in order ‘to give people more time to shop for Christmas’.⁵

Exactly when Christmas shopping became linked to the day immediately following Thanksgiving cannot be determined. However, a dry goods store in Lima, Ohio, was offering ‘unusual selling values’ for various items on ‘Friday, the day after Thanksgiving’, according to a newspaper advertisement from 1894.⁶ Similarly, a department store in New Castle, Pennsylvania (roughly 370 km east of Lima) was selling ‘coats and dresses at radical reductions’ as part of its ‘annual After Thanksgiving Sale’ on Friday.⁷ Also still to be determined is how the day for post-Thanksgiving sales became known as Black Friday — a term that earlier had been used to describe dark days of financial panics in both 1867 and 1869.⁸ The Wall Street crash that triggered the economic depression of the 1930s brought similar usages — albeit for Black Thursday (24 October 1929) and Black Tuesday (29 October 1929).

The city of Philadelphia — or at least some of its police officers, bus operators, and taxi drivers — first used the term Black Friday in the mid-1960s to describe the terrible congestion occurring on the day after Thanksgiving, according to a stamp-shop proprietor in Center City, Philadelphia.⁹ The traffic was particularly bad on this day, due not only to so many people travelling for Thanksgiving, but also the playing of the annual Army-Navy football game on the Saturday.¹⁰ Coverage of the game in the *New York Times* in 1975 gave the Black Friday term nation-

⁵ Brown, ‘Fourth Thursday’.

⁶ Reprinted in Sapna Maheshwari, ‘How Black Friday Became a Thing: A Tale 140 Years in the Making’, *BuzzFeed News*, 26 November 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sapna/how-black-friday-became-a-thing?> [accessed 17 May 2020].

⁷ Reprinted in Maheshwari, ‘Black Friday’.

⁸ See, for example, ‘The Skeleton in the Closet’, *Flag of our Union*, 22 (27 April 1867), 268; and ‘Financial, Commercial, and Statistical’, *The Albion: A Journal of News, Politics, and Literature*, 47 (25 December 1869), p. 785.

⁹ Martin Apfelbaum, ‘Philadelphia’s “Black Friday”’, *American Philatelist*, 79 (January 1966), 239.

¹⁰ Philadelphia hosted the Army-Navy football game from 1936 to 1979 because it was a neutral halfway point between West Point, New York, and Annapolis, Maryland, with a stadium sufficiently large to accommodate the crowds. In 2009, the date of the game shifted from the Thanksgiving weekend to the second Saturday in December. The venue now changes periodically, but Philadelphia hosted the game in 2014, and 2016–2019.

al exposure,¹¹ though it has now acquired meanings ironically different from those of its origins in traffic congestion and, earlier, in financial disaster. According to a retail analyst at Bear Stearns investment firm (as reported, once again, in the *New York Times*), Black Friday is so named because, 'It is the day when most retailers go from being in the red to being in the black'.¹²

Regardless of the term's origin, Black Friday quickly became one of the busiest shopping days of the year, and a day that is used by retailers 'to lure shoppers to their stores, with extended shopping hours, hourly deals, and in-store promotions'.¹³ Statistics vary from year to year, depending in part on the weather and the offerings. In 2018, the International Council of Shopping Centers, which describes itself as 'the premier global trade association of the shopping center industry', saw Black Friday as 'the busiest shopping day of the year'.¹⁴ By 2019, however, Black Friday had dropped to number two; its sales of \$31.2 billion were ten percent behind record-setting sales of \$34.4 billion on Super Saturday, the last Saturday before Christmas.¹⁵

To increase both sales and excitement during the 2000s, stores began opening earlier and earlier on Black Friday, promising extraordinary savings to those who were first in line and thus first to grab for themselves the limited supply of deeply discounted merchandise in a mad dash to signal the start of the holiday shopping season. The result, according to professor of media studies Kenneth Rogers, was,

a sensational media event. Obligatory human interest stories feature images of impetuous shoppers dashing frantically into aisles

¹¹ Gordon S. White, 'Army vs. Navy: A Dimming of Splendor', *New York Times*, 29 November 1975, p. 21.

¹² Kenneth N. Gilpin, 'Retailers Ready to Gallop into the Black', *New York Times*, 23 November 2003, Business section, p. 6.

¹³ Esther Swilley and Ronald E. Goldsmith, 'Black Friday and Cyber Monday: Understanding Consumer Intentions on Two Major Shopping Days', *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 20 (2013), 43–50 (p. 44).

¹⁴ International Council of Shopping Centers, 'Black Friday Still Busiest Shopping Day, Study Says', 20 September 2018, <https://www.icsc.com/news-and-views/icsc-exchange/black-friday-still-busiest-shopping-day-study-says> [accessed 17 May 2020].

¹⁵ Lisa Wolfson, 'Saturday Shopping Sets U.S. One-Day Sales Record, Analyst Says', *Bloomberg News*, 23 December 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-23/super-saturday-shopping-sets-one-day-sales-record-analyst-says> [accessed 17 May 2020].

*stacked impossibly high with discounted retail goods and feverishly foraging through stuffed racks and bargain bins, while the more staid coverage by the financial press tracks sales numbers minute by minute as a weathervane of consumer confidence.*¹⁶

John Seabrook, in the *New Yorker*, likened the mad dash to ‘a sort of American Pamplona’, which has ‘become as much a part of the day after Thanksgiving as leftovers. Shoppers get discounts, programmers get some lively content for a slow news day, and retailers get free publicity: a good deal for everyone, except for the clerks who have to work that day, breaking up fights among shoppers and cleaning up the mess left behind’.¹⁷



Fig. 1. Crowds gather outside the Apple Store on Fifth Avenue in New York City for Black Friday sales on Thanksgiving Day, 24 November 2011.

*Photo by JoelInQueens, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*¹⁸

¹⁶ Kenneth Rogers, ‘Black Friday: Crowdsourcing Communities at Risk’, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 40 (2012), 171–86 (pp. 171–72).

¹⁷ John Seabrook, ‘Annals of Disaster: Crush Point’, *New Yorker*, 86 (7 February 2011), 32–38 (p. 34).

¹⁸ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Black_Friday_at_the_Apple_Store_on_Fifth_Avenue,_New_York_City,_2011.jpg [accessed 2 November 2020].

What seems to be overlooked in the media sensationalism surrounding these mad dashes is a folkloristic framework that identifies the customary behavior of Black Friday participants as ritualistic. According to marketing professor Dennis Rook,

*the term ritual refers to a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviors that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time. Ritual behavior is dramatically scripted and acted out and is performed with formality, seriousness, and inner intensity.*¹⁹

Although outside observers of the mad dash may see it as unplanned chaos — much like the running of the bulls in Pamplona — the perspectives of actual participants, discussed below, suggest otherwise.



Fig. 2. Black Friday sales in Buenos Aires, Argentina, November 2017, demonstrate the worldwide spread of the phenomenon.
Photo by James I. Deutsch

¹⁹ Dennis W. Rook, 'The Ritual Dimension of Consumer Behavior', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12 (1985), 251–64 (p. 252).

Another folkloristic framework for analyzing the customary behavior of Black Friday participants is Joseph Campbell's notion of the hero's journey or what Campbell termed the *monomyth* (borrowing the word from James Joyce's 1939 experimental novel *Finnegans Wake*).²⁰ As explained by Campbell,

*The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage [...] a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return, [...] which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth. A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.*²¹

These two frameworks may be applied to Black Friday thanks to a fascinating series of interviews with thirty-eight women who were at least eighteen years old, and who 'had to have shopped on Black Friday more than one year in a row', conducted over a two-year period by two business professors, Jane Boyd Thomas and Cara Peters.²² The interviews reveal a series of actions and insider rules that are not only formal, serious, and intense, but that also follow a script analogous to the monomyth described by Campbell. *Separation* takes the form of team planning and strategising; *initiation* is achieved through the mad dash for the best bargains; and *return* occurs after the mission has been accomplished, often with the sharing of war stories and passing on the traditions.

Admittedly, most Black Friday participants may not regard themselves as folkloric heroes who venture forth from a commonplace world into a realm of supernatural wonder. But, there is certainly a sense of

²⁰ The word *monomyth* appears once in *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 'And didn't they abhor him? the unregendered thunderslog, the male man all unbracing to omniwoman? when they were looking on: the Four and their Ass; the three; the Two. And his Monomyth, ah ho! — Say no more about it. I'm sorry. I saw. I'm sorry to say I saw' (p. 581).

²¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 30, 35 (italics original).

²² Jane Boyd Thomas and Cara Peters, 'An Exploratory Investigation of Black Friday Consumption Rituals', *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management*, 39 (2011), 522–37 (p. 525).

adventure, particularly as described by Darla (age 56): 'It's a fabulous adventure and I've gotten to the point where I have gotten my whole family involved in it. [...] It's been a family adventure for the past four years'.²³ Similarly, Sarah (age 60) enthuses, 'It's adventurous finding the bargains they advertise. [...] A lot of them are not readily in sight. You have to go past lots of merchandise before you find that super sale item'.²⁴

One of the first steps in the quest for Black Friday bargains is the planning and strategising before shoppers even enter the superstore. Laura (age 30) explains her technique: 'I look through *all* the sales ads to see what every store has on sale. I do this even if I know that I am shopping for only one item that year. I want to know everything possible about what is on sale and where'.²⁵ Jenna (age 21) employs a similar planning strategy with her mother: 'We look through newspapers and read through all the ads. [...] We decide on which stores we think are gonna have the best and rarest deals. Then we plan to visit those stores first'.²⁶

What particularly pleases the Black Friday participants is their initiation into the world of wonder, where they achieve a decisive victory against external forces. Tanya (age 28) enjoys the competition with other shoppers:

*It's fun to try to get as many bargains as I possibly can in a limited amount of time. It's like a game show. It's competitive in the sense that everybody is trying to be near the head of the line and get the sale item before everyone else. Walmart, for example, has specific lines to buy certain products so it's a competition to be at the head of the line so you get the product before it runs out. It's competitive when they actually announce the time you can actually take the item and put it in your cart and that is one less for someone else.*²⁷

Sarah knows how winning is defined:

That I get several items that are good bargains — you know, items at good prices. When I compare what the original price was, and what

²³ Thomas and Peters, 'Black Friday Consumption Rituals', p. 529.

²⁴ Thomas and Peters, 'Black Friday Consumption Rituals', p. 532.

²⁵ Thomas and Peters, 'Black Friday Consumption Rituals', p. 530 (emphasis original).

²⁶ Thomas and Peters, 'Black Friday Consumption Rituals', p. 530.

²⁷ Thomas and Peters, 'Black Friday Consumption Rituals', p. 531.

*I got it for and I feel like I was able to save some money, that's success. Let's see, last November, for example, I got men's slacks for \$15 and I got a blouse for myself that was \$5. The blouse was originally \$40. Now that's a good bargain!*²⁸

When a decisive victory has been won, the Black Friday participants return to their everyday lives, but with a sense of renewed power, which is shared with their friends and cohorts. Tanya and her family members,

*trade stories about our interactions in different parts of the stores because we're not necessarily all together, at the same time, in the same moment, you know. My Mom may be in electronics; I may be in clothing; and my sister may be in CD's. And it's fun when we all get out of the mad dash and have purchased our items. We then get back in the car and swap war stories.*²⁹

The shopping adventure is often serious, intense, and tough; but it is ultimately about togetherness, bonding, and human connections. Traci (age 40) concludes, 'It's about being together. We all survive and make it through the day together'.³⁰ Similarly, Kenzie (age 47) explains that Black Friday used to be,

*a tradition with my Mom and me. But, as the stores have started opening earlier, it is hard for my Mom to do such a long day. So, it is switching over to a tradition between my daughter and me. I like the idea of being able to teach my daughter how to find bargains and great deals.*³¹

Whether the stories told and traditions shared by the women interviewed by Thomas and Peters are wholly representative of all Black Friday shoppers cannot be confirmed due to the lack of reliable demographic data. What is more certain, however, is the decline in recent years of the mad-dash adventure, due to several external factors. One is the increased regulation of Black Friday customs following the tragic death of Jdimytai Damour, a thirty-four-year-old Wal-Mart³² employee

²⁸ Thomas and Peters, 'Black Friday Consumption Rituals', p. 532.

²⁹ Thomas and Peters, 'Black Friday Consumption Rituals', p. 531.

³⁰ Thomas and Peters, 'Black Friday Consumption Rituals', p. 528.

³¹ Thomas and Peters, 'Black Friday Consumption Rituals', p. 529.

³² At the time of this incident in 2008, Wal-Mart would have been correct; the company dropped the hyphen in 2017 (see Lauren Hirsch, 'Wal-Mart Stores to Change

in Valley Stream, New York, on Black Friday 2008, 'just minutes before [the store] was scheduled to open at 5:00 a.m.'³³ Damour was trampled by 'an "out-of-control" mob of frenzied shoppers [who] smashed through the Long Island store's front doors' in search of deeply discounted products.³⁴ This tragedy — said to be 'a Black Friday first, according to the National Retail Federation' — led to a lawsuit filed in the New York State Supreme Court against Wal-Mart, alleging that the company 'engaged in specific marketing and advertising techniques to specifically attract a large crowd and create an environment of frenzy and mayhem'.³⁵ In response, Wal-Mart 'reached a settlement with the Nassau County, N.Y., district attorney that called for the company to adopt new crowd management techniques in all 92 of its stores in New York State'.³⁶ Wal-Mart also 'dropped the term Blitz Day', which had been used in 2007 and 2008, and 'rebranded its post-Thanksgiving Day sales The Event'.³⁷ Damour's death at the beginning of a traditional mad dash, which had become ritualised and customary, would undoubtedly deflate any enjoyment felt by other Black Friday shoppers, such as Darla, Jenna, Kenzie, Laura, Sarah, Tanya, and Traci.

Posing an even greater existential threat to Black Friday rituals is the more recent custom of Cyber Monday, which acquired its name in 2005 to identify the phenomenon of consumers shopping for bargains online, even while ostensibly back at work on the Monday after Thanksgiving. Reports as early as 2015 suggested that 'Shoppers opted to buy online rather than fight the crowds in brick-and-mortar stores'.³⁸ In that same year, the *Wall Street Journal* estimated that 59

Name to Walmart, as it Shifts its Focus to E-commerce, 6 December 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/06/wal-mart-stores-to-be-to-walmart-as-it-shifts-its-focus-to-e-commerce.html> [accessed 22 June 2020].

³³ Rogers, 'Black Friday', p. 171.

³⁴ Joe Gould, Clare Trapasso, and Rich Shapiro, 'Worker Dies at Long Island Wal-Mart after Being Trampled in Black Friday Stampede', *New York Daily News*, 28 November 2008, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/worker-dies-li-wal-mart-stampede-article-1.334059> [accessed 17 May 2020].

³⁵ Jack Neff, 'Marketing Blamed in Walmart Death', *Advertising Age*, 79 (8 December 2008), 23.

³⁶ Steven Greenhouse, 'Wal-Mart Displays its Legal Might, Fighting \$7,000 Fine in Trampling Case', *New York Times*, 7 July 2010, p. B1.

³⁷ Seabrook, 'Annals of Disaster', p. 38.

³⁸ Marcia Kaplan, 'Sales Report: 2015 Thanksgiving Day, Black Friday, Cyber Monday', *PracticalEcommerce*, 2 December 2015, <http://www.practicalecommerce.com/>



Fig. 3. Eager shoppers rush inside a shopping mall in Laramie, Wyoming, when Black Friday sales begin.

Photo by Powhusku, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons³⁹

percent of Thanksgiving shopping money is currently spent online, 36 percent is spent in stores, and 5 percent is done via catalogs: 'What for decades had been a purely in-store shopping frenzy has ceded much ground to the Internet.'⁴⁰ By Thanksgiving 2019, the pattern was clear: 'a record \$9.4 billion was spent online by the end of Cyber Monday, an increase of 19.7 percent from 2018. It was the largest online shopping day of all time in the U.S., easily surpassing last year's \$7.9 billion'.⁴¹

articles/94777-Sales-Report-2015-Thanksgiving-Day-Black-Friday-Cyber-Monday [accessed 17 May 2020].

³⁹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Black_Friday_by_Powhusku.jpg [accessed 2 November 2020].

⁴⁰ Paul Ziobro, 'Target Escalates Battle for Holiday Web Sales', *Wall Street Journal*, 27 November 2015, p. B1.

⁴¹ Marcia Kaplan, 'Sales Report: 2019 Thanksgiving Day, Black Friday, Cyber Monday', *PracticalEcommerce*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.practicalecommerce.com/sales-report-2019-thanksgiving-day-black-friday-cyber-monday> [accessed 17 May 2020].

By comparison, Black Friday's online sales in 2019 were \$7.4 billion, but its in-store sales are no longer carefully documented. One analyst claims that brick-and-mortar sales on 2019's Black Friday increased 4.2 percent from 2018; another asserts that those sales declined 6.2 percent from the previous year.⁴² Complicating the analysis is that the total number of Black Friday shoppers, for both in-store and online activity, far exceeds any other day's totals: 84.2 million in-store and 93.2 million online – with many individuals shopping in both ways.⁴³

The increased use of mobile devices, largely smartphones, is fueling the rise in online shopping. In 2015, according to *USA Today*, Mobile traffic accounted for nearly half of all online traffic and 27.6 percent of all online sales [on Cyber] Monday, which is up more than 25 percent from the year before.⁴⁴ By 2019, those numbers had increased significantly; according to one estimate, '76 percent of all digital traffic during Cyber Weekend came from a mobile device'.⁴⁵

One of the contributing factors for increased online sales – whether mobile or not – was that some physical stores, such as GameStop, Nordstrom, Recreational Equipment Inc. (REI), and Staples, decided to close on Thanksgiving Day in 2015. All of those stores 'saw a substantial increase in online traffic and sales' during the weekend.⁴⁶ And in a move that was perhaps unprecedented for a major retailer in 2015, REI closed its 143 physical stores nationwide on Black Friday, encouraging its potential shoppers to spend the day outdoors instead – a decision that REI has continued to make every year since then.⁴⁷ The company's CEO, Jerry Stritzke, told reporters that 'Black Friday is the

⁴² Kaplan, 'Sales Report: 2019'.

⁴³ 'Thanksgiving Weekend Draws Nearly 190 Million Shoppers, Spending Up 16 Percent', *National Retail Federation*, 3 December 2019, <https://nrf.com/media-center/press-releases/thanksgiving-draws-nearly-190-million-shoppers> [accessed 17 May 2020].

⁴⁴ Hadley Malcolm, 'Cyber Monday Clocks Record Sales Led by Surge in Mobile', *USA Today*, 2 December 2015, p. 4B.

⁴⁵ Adriana Lee, 'Cyber Monday's \$9.4 Billion Sales Blitz', *Women's Wear Daily*, 3 December 2019, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Kaplan, 'Sales Report: 2015'.

⁴⁷ Kelly Tyko, 'Shop on Black Friday? REI Encourages Shoppers to #OptOutside Instead', *USA Today*, 23 October 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/10/22/black-friday-store-closings-2019-rei-optoutside-initiative/4063598002> [accessed 17 May 2020].

perfect time to remind ourselves of the essential truth that life is richer, more connected and complete when you choose to spend it outside'.⁴⁸

How many consumers actually took Stritzke's advice cannot be determined. But it seems safe to say that the team efforts of yesterday's Black Fridays — with the type of camaraderie described by the adventurous social shoppers interviewed by Thomas and Peters — are being replaced by online shopping that is conducted more individually and in isolation, largely on mobile devices that only one person can use at a time. Even if online shoppers may share their screens with their friends to show what they are purchasing, the act of touching the screen or clicking the mouse must be the work of one person alone, whose eyes are typically fixated on the screen rather than in contact with their companions. Shopping alone may be more convenient than a mad dash through a superstore, but folklorists and sociologists may also wonder what we as human beings may be giving up as a result. In spite of the 'social networks' to which we may belong, our participation in social life appears to be declining.⁴⁹

In the late twentieth century, sociologist Robert Putnam observed a trend away from social experiences and towards greater privacy and individuality:

*Many Americans continue to claim that we are 'members' of various organizations, but most Americans no longer spend much time in community organizations — we've stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as officers, and stopped going to meetings. And all this despite rapid increases in education that have given more of us than ever before the skills, the resources, and the interests that once fostered civic engagement. In short, Americans have been dropping out in droves, not merely from political life, but from organized community life more generally.*⁵⁰

As we move further into the twenty-first century, we find that our relationship to technology is changing, a point that was cogently made

⁴⁸ Sarah Halzack, 'REI to Close Stores on Black Friday', *Washington Post*, 27 October 2015, p. A14.

⁴⁹ Joe Robinson, 'Is Social Networking Destroying our Social Lives?' *Huffington Post*, 1 February 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-robinson/social-network_b_816108.html [accessed 17 May 2020].

⁵⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), pp. 63–64.

in the film *Her* (2013), directed by Spike Jonze and starring Joaquin Phoenix, about a man falling in love with his telephone's operating system, voiced by Scarlett Johansson. 'Technology is no longer some huge extrinsic force that only reaches us in times of war, industrial upheaval, or nuclear paranoia', wrote one reviewer of the film. 'Today's technology is personal. We live, for lack of a better phrase, in the Age of Apple — the indispensable PC, the omnipresent iPhone, the custom iTunes playlist'.⁵¹

One consequence of technology's personalization and ubiquity is the loss of human interaction. 'People in technologically advanced societies in particular live and talk with each other more and more through avatars and interfaces', rather than through face-to-face communications.⁵² It seems unlikely that our Thanksgiving dinners will ever be consumed alone in isolation, but the social shopping that once followed the turkey seems to be heading the way of the dodo, great auk, and passenger pigeon.

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⁵¹ Andrew Romano, 'How "Her" Gets the Future Right', *Daily Beast*, 21 December 2013; updated 11 July 2017, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/12/21/how-her-gets-the-future-right.html> [accessed 17 May 2020].

⁵² Aaron Cutler, 'Her', *Cineaste*, 39 (Summer 2014), 54–55 (p. 54).

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