

## **Online spectatorship of death and dying: Pleasure, purpose and community in BestGore.com**

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### **Abstract:**

Despite the explosion of ‘shock sites’ on the Internet, few studies have examined viewers’ reactions to the real-life images of death they contain, or conceptualized users as members of a community. The present study addresses these gaps via analysis of 8 videos, 35 photographs, and 600 user-generated comments on BestGore.com. Results show that humor is the most common response, though the target of ridicule varies by mode of death. Users also access BestGore to encounter ‘reality’ and criticize systems of power that perpetuate suffering. Some report symptoms of vicarious trauma, though others experience relief as a result of viewing shock content. As a community, BestGore users enact membership by exhibiting a macabre sense of humor, sharing tastes in other consumption fields, and providing support to troubled users. One worrisome aspect of this community is the prejudicial attitude users direct towards minority groups, whose lives are deemed less livable and grievable.

**Keywords:** shock sites, death and dying, BestGore.com, online communities, audience reception, spectatorial position.

### **Introduction**

Since the advent of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s, when consumer content could finally be uploaded, the number of websites that make available gruesome and horrific imagery of death and dying have exploded on the Internet. Scholars have addressed the textual properties of such content, and from those properties *inferred* the motivations that impel viewing and the pleasures or horrors experienced by viewers. However, very few studies

actually examine the reactions of viewers who visit or subscribe to such sites. Even fewer are studies that stratify audience reception by type of content. Moreover, its viewers are often conceived of as a vulnerable ‘mass’ (Butsch, 2011)—dispersed, isolated, and lacking strong communal ties—rather than as ‘community.’ The present study addresses these gaps in the literature by examining photographs and videos of death and dying, and viewer comments accompanying such imagery, on the website BestGore.com, which prides itself in the circulation of unadulterated content. Building upon Tait’s (2008) typology of spectatorial positions, the study will show that audience reception of horrific content online varies by mode of death depicted, here categorized according to the NASH (natural, accident, suicide, homicide) classification system (Leenaars, 1999). Drawing on the paradigmatic dimensions of community outlined by Willson (2006), Baym (2010), and others, the study will then proceed to show what makes BestGore.com a community in its own right, without lapsing into either rhapsodic celebration or moral panic, for cybercommunities, like their analog counterparts, have both emancipatory and worrisome dimensions. But first, I review the extant literature on ‘shock sites’, of which BestGore.com is an example, and then the theories on online community that guide the present study.<sup>1</sup>

## Literature Review & Conceptual Framework

### *Shock Sites Explicated*

Bartlett (2014) estimated that there about nine thousand shock sites that make available gruesome images of real-life violence, death, and dying, the kind one would be hard-pressed to find in Western legacy and news media. Of those shock sites found on the World Wide Web, content varies tremendously and may include captured footage of automobile accidents, suicide by defenestration, terrorist beheadings and executions, the loss of appendages during combat, medical cadavers and autopsies, humans being mauled by wild animals, and a myriad other forms of body horror. Yet, the content of shock sites share many *defining* characteristics, as outlined by Jones (2010).

First, says Jones, shock content ‘revels in the physicality of the body’ (p. 124), displaying bodies at or beyond the limits of physiological functioning. Second, the images exceed the bounds of propriety and are taboo in relation to what is considered normal in Western society. In Bourdieu’s terms (1984), these tastes are not institutionally legitimated, carrying little cultural capital and ranking extremely low in the cultural economy. Brottman (2004) would add that even among users of shock sites, some content offends more than others, suggesting hierarchies of taste *within* this consumption field. She recalls the backlash against one video that set images of bodies leaping from the World Trade Center, to the song ‘Free Falling’ by Tom Petty. Third, shock content contains aural and visual registers that connote realism and authenticity: ‘the content ... is assured, correctly or not, to be real’ (Jones, 2010, p. 131). This is also corroborated by Brottman (2004), who writes: ‘For anything to be considered truly horrifying, it has to be *seen*—and, preferably, rendered as graphic and lifelike in detail as possible’ (p. 164). The operative word here is ‘lifelike’,

because shock sites sometimes contain faux content that passes as ‘real’, although viewers highly competent at decoding shock content can presumably discriminate what is real from what is not. It must be added that the medium through which content is accessed can also contribute to its realism. Shocking imagery is perceived as realistic by virtue of it being on the Internet, where there are fewer restrictions on airing controversial content relative to legacy media.

In both popular and academic discourse, the gruesome content of shock sites is often branded as pornographic; examples include ‘shock porn’, ‘gore porn’, ‘death porn’ and ‘war porn.’ The articulation of war with porn, says Jones (2010), has its origins in U.S. soldiers trading pictures of dead Iraqis for pornographic pictures of women online during G.W. Bush’s War on Terror. For Baudrillard (2006), gruesome images of war—particularly, atrocities committed by American soldiers on foreign soil—are pornographic *because* they crystallize and revel in the West’s ‘bad conscience’ (p. 87). This was especially the case when photos from Abu Ghraib, in which Iraqi prisoners were sodomized with chemical glow sticks and forced by U.S. soldiers into humiliating poses, were leaked (Astley, 2016, p. 161; Orgad, 2012, p. 5-6). In any event, the articulation of ‘porn’ with shock imagery presupposes a ‘double denigration’ (Jones, 2010, p. 132): the misappropriation of the image as an object of both pleasure *and* revulsion, and the distancing of the viewer, who inhabits a comparably mundane existence, from the spectacularized other. Such imagery, it is said, combines ‘Eros (desire) with Thanatos (finitude)’ (p. 135), and elicits the combined affective and bodily responses of nausea, arousal, fear, excitement, amusement, titillation, power, and offense.

The reasons cited in the literature as to why viewers seek shocking content are manifold, and according to Petley (2016), may include ‘mere curiosity, a genuine desire to know more about the world, indulging in the “yuck” factor, bravado, and—it has to be admitted—seeking confirmation of their own beliefs or trying to persuade others of their validity’ (p. 42-43). However, extant literature on shock sites and shocking content make assumptions about the audience based on the properties of media texts, and seldom make empirical forays into the reception of said texts. The ‘double denigration’ Jones (2010) speaks of is based on textual analysis, as are the presumed affective and bodily responses experienced at the moment of viewing. Meanwhile, Brottman (2004) draws on Freudian psychoanalytic theory to explain the allure of censored images of 9/11. She observes that ‘broadcast footage of the collapse of the World Trade Center is remarkable not for its horror but for its *absence* of horror’ (p. 166). Because unadulterated images of the event were omitted from legacy news media—and therefore, from collective American consciousness—Brottman argues that it is only natural for these censored images to be sought. Drawing on Freud’s (1990/1920) repetition-compulsion principle and his ‘return of the repressed’, she writes: ‘repressed material will return in the form of obsessional thoughts or impulses capable of governing future actions’ (p. 174). Jones (2010), on the other hand, credits neither trauma nor its repression but our collective longing for the authentic in an artificial world characterized by an excess of simulacra. For Jones, then, the content of shock sites serves as vessels of the real.

One of the few studies to empirically and systematically study audience reception of shocking content online was conducted by Tait (2008). In her study, Tait deals with the spectatorial positions taken up by viewers of the 'gore' site LiveLeak.com and its previous incarnation, the now-defunct Ogrish.com. Tait contests writings on 'body horror' spectatorship that liken it to pornography and treat the act of looking as inherently pleasurable and fetishistic. As Tait argues, the articulation of 'horror' with 'porn' is misleading, because horror and porn elicit different forms of arousal. Moreover, the pornographic metaphor, when applied to body horror, occludes the moral value of choosing to look (or not look), as well as the meaning-making that takes place among viewers. Lastly, the subjects of conventional pornography typically consent to their appearance on-screen and to the circulation of their image, while the victimized subjects of body horror do *not*.

Tait (2008) identified four spectatorial positions (p. 100-101) from analyzing a purposive sample of comments posted on Ogrishforum.com, which survived the transition of Ogrish to LiveLeak in 2006. The first is the 'amoral gaze', in which the suffering subject becomes a source of stimulation, pleasure or hilarity to viewers. Unlike conventional pornography, arousal here is derived from shock, revulsion, fear, even terror—not titillation. The pleasure of the amoral gaze diminishes over time, and of the four spectatorial positions, it is the *least* frequently exhibited on Ogrishforum. Next, there is the 'vulnerable gaze', in which viewers experience mental or emotional harm as a result of looking. As viewers watch others suffer, they themselves suffer. Their sense of safety is breached as their sense of vulnerability is magnified. The third spectatorial position is the 'entitled gaze.' Here, viewers express a duty or desire to see what legacy media has hidden or whitewashed. Looking attains a counter-cultural sensibility and is framed in terms of anti-censorship discourses. Lastly, there is the 'responsive gaze' in which looking is teleological. Examples may include the EMT who wishes to blunt his emotional response to the sight of mangled bodies, or the soldier who is preparing himself for the horrors of combat.

Tait's typology shows the limits of the pornographic metaphor and allows us to appreciate the diversity of responses to shock content online. Having said that, one wonders if the four spectatorial positions are in fact mutually exclusive. It could be argued that viewers oscillate between gazes or embody multiple gazes simultaneously. One cannot discount the possibility of a viewer who feels a moral imperative to see the terrorist beheadings (entitled), and then finds himself psychologically traumatized (vulnerable). Or the viewer who seeks shocking content as preparation for a dangerous occupation (responsive), but unexpectedly finds pleasure in the sights and sounds he encounters (amoral). Also, because Tait's study chooses breadth over depth (a necessary trade-off), her typology does not discriminate between the *types* of body horror witnessed. It is only reasonable to assume that some spectators seek specific types of content, and that the motivations for and consequences of viewing such content would differ from those identified by Tait. For example, affect elicited by captured footage of suicide would have a different texture from affect elicited by murder. Different deaths, different pleasures and/or

horrors. Lastly, comments on shock sites are not posted unilaterally. Conversations form between users, suggesting a virtual community of sorts.

### ***Dimensions of Online Community***

According to Meyers (2013), the choice to participate in a particular online venue 'is itself a way to define a community, as it aligns the individual with a certain set of interpretive strategies [...] that reflect a particular set of social values' (p. 90). Obviously, members of a community need not share the same physical space, though they must still share the same bounded space, which can be virtual or imagined. Furthermore, individuals belong to several communities, both real and virtual (Busse & Gray, 2011, p. 436), a fact that is even more pronounced in technologically-reliant societies. Nevertheless, there has been much debate as to what, exactly, constitutes 'community' in cyberspace. Moores (2005) argues that belongingness is key to community, and citing Castells, adds shared 'interests, values, affinities, and projects' (p. 169). Two additional models of community are offered by Willson (2006) and Baym (2010), whose typologies overlap and can be put in productive dialogue with one another.

According to Willson, the first and most vital aspect of community is *bonding*, referring to the sense of connection between members, who feel that they belong together. This imaginary connection is reinforced by the sharing of meaningful rituals and symbols, and by routinized behaviors—called *shared practices* by Baym—that capture values deemed paramount by members. Bonding is the bedrock upon which community grows; without it, one would merely have an aggregate of individuals.

The second paradigmatic dimension for Willson is *reciprocity*. This is analogous to Baym's *shared resources*, which involves the solicitation and offering of support, be it informational, emotional or esteem—or in certain cases, tangible aid. Reciprocity instills trust and creates order and predictability within a community, because members can rest assured that they can depend upon others during times of great need. Reciprocity goes hand in hand with *recognition*, which, says Willson, enables members to differentiate insider from outsider and allocate resources accordingly.

The third element is *commonality*, which Willson defines as the perception of similarity. What is shared can refer to values, myths, histories, life experiences, special interests, and sociodemographic characteristics like race, class, sexual orientation, and faith. Commonality need not mean homogeneity, for the interests of community members can be variegated. Rather, community thrives when these diverse or competing interests co-exist peacefully or non-violently. For Willson, the number of similarities between members is positively correlated with the strength of a community. Baym, however, would disagree, on the grounds that even *interpersonal relations* can form along a single dimension, such as a shared cultural interest (e.g. a television program) or aspect of identity (e.g. age, race-ethnicity, disability status).

Finally, there is Willson's *intersubjective identity*, which is identical to Baym's *shared identity*. This refers to an identity that is possessed by the entire community, distinct from

yet contributing to individual members' identities. A person's community identity is part and parcel of his or her individual identity; only in extreme cases does community identity overtake individual identity. While all communities have homogenizing tendencies, of concern is how a community manages its relationship to other communities (e.g. friendly, hostile), to the so-called 'other.' The present study seeks to extend our understanding of online communities by undercutting the stereotype that shock site users are inherently amoral and misanthropic, while showing that the positive dimensions of community exhibited by these users have limits and are restricted to members of the in-group.

## Research Methods and Design

Via analysis of extant data online, the present study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What apparent pleasures and purposes, if any, do BestGore users experience upon witnessing lives end, and how might these vary by the type of death depicted?
2. Is BestGore.com a community in its own right?

## About the Website

BestGore.com is a user-generated shock site owned and created by Mark Marek. Launched in April 2008, it attracts an estimated 10 to 15 million *page views* per month from users worldwide (Wikipedia, n.d.). A less conservative estimate comes from Worth of Web (n.d.), citing 32 million *page views* per month by 6.4 million *visitors*. BestGore's heavy traffic, combined with its diverse content and high degree of interactivity (more on these ahead), make it an ideal object of study among the sea of shock sites online.

BestGore's revenues come primarily from donations and advertising; in fact, the site contains a plethora of ads that link to pornographic websites, which on the surface corroborate the articulation of 'gore' with 'porn' that has been observed by Brottman (2004) and Jones (2010). The site describes itself as a 'reality news website' and claims that the videos and photographs uploaded by users are as 'real as they get', 'not the work of some Hollywood special effects team' (BestGore, n.d.). As stated on its homepage: 'Videos and images posted on BestGore are bloody, gut wrenching, teeth grinding, offensive, and upsetting. Just as the life itself.' BestGore purports to have educational value for medical professionals, law enforcement, and the military, who presumably use its content. Like LiveLeak, its ostensible mission is to expose truth 'without holdbacks.'

Upon entering the site, visitors are greeted by a warning statement, which partly reads:

the materials presented at BestGore are of adult, obscene, vulgar, disgusting, graphic, gory, disturbing or shocking natures.... By clicking on ENTER, you

further certify that you are not offended by such materials and that you are intentionally and knowingly seeking access to them for your own personal viewing.

Although access to the site requires that users be at least eighteen years of age, or the age of majority in their place of residence, the age restriction does not appear to be enforced. Membership, which is free, is not required to access the site's contents, but is required if one wants to converse with other members, or post photos, videos, and accompanying descriptions. Shocking content is moderated by users to ensure that it does not violate U.S. and Canadian obscenity laws. The site operates out of Canada and is hosted in the U.S., and the About page assures viewers that BestGore is '100% legal in both jurisdictions'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, corpses of children that were 'recorded for medical purposes and/or as crime scene photos to assist with criminal investigation', the likes of which one may find in medical or forensic textbooks, are technically legal and can be found on BestGore. Audio-visual content is uploaded by users throughout the world, from such countries as the Philippines, Brazil, India, and Nigeria, who sometimes provide English translations for foreign-language content. Virtually all comments posted are in English, however. Participation in the site is anonymous, with members assuming a handle and an avatar.

### ***Data Collection and Analytic Procedures***

Upon entering the site visitors are taken to the homepage, and to the right is a listing of thirty-six BestGore Topics such as 'Execution', 'Impalement', and 'Police Brutality.' For the purposes of this study, I followed the NASH (natural, accident, suicide, homicide) classification (Lenaars, 1999), the traditional model for reporting deaths. Specifically, I restricted myself to audio-visual content and comments within the following BestGore Topics: 'Medical', 'Road Accidents', 'Suicide' and 'Murder.' As a rule of thumb, I chose topics that either subsumed other topics, such as 'Suicide' instead of 'Hanging', or were statistically more prevalent, such as 'Road Accidents' instead of 'Workplace Accidents.' By design, I excluded content related to war and terrorism given the abundance of scholarly literature already devoted to the subject (e.g. Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009).

For my sample, I selected three of the most recent entries (brief description of shock content, plus photos and/or videos) within each of the four topics, for a total of 12 entries. I also selected the first 50 comments accompanying each entry for a total of 600 user-generated comments (150 per topic), which were compiled into a 188-page PDF document. To answer Research Question 1, I analyzed the comments under each topic separately using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), which allows categories to emerge organically from the data while recognizing that they are subject to change throughout the research process. In other words, categories were not defined *a priori*, although categories from the literature were considered (e.g. Tait's spectatorial positions). I conducted multiple rounds of coding to increase coding completeness and accuracy. In the initial coding stage, I generated as many categories as possible based on recurring patterns in the data. I then

reviewed the transcripts to verify those categories, check for discrepancies, and identify additional categories previously missed. In the next stage, I grouped together related categories to identify overarching themes as well as grand narratives. To conclude the first phase of the study, I compared my findings across the four topics.

To answer Research Question 2, I again enlisted grounded theory to analyze all 600 comments in the aggregate, keeping conversations between users nested. Emergent themes were then reconciled with the dimensions of community identified in the literature by Willson (2006), Baym (2010), and others. Admittedly, because of the focus on written and audio-visual content, the present inquiry into community excluded more peripheral forms of participation, such as ‘lurking’ or ‘listening’ (Crawford, 2009), in which users of social media read without posting or making their presence felt. In both phases of the study, analysis of all comments was conducted manually by the author and was supplemented by an examination of the entries themselves (8 videos and 35 photographs), to understand how the combined words and images generate meaning for users.

### ***A Brief Statement on Ethics***

The data analyzed do not meet the definition of private information, on two grounds. First, user-generated comments on BestGore are public because they are posted in a context characterized by heavy traffic (at least 10 million page views per month, as I have noted above). Thus, users *cannot* reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place. Also, the act of posting a comment on BestGore is itself a public act, directed towards subscribers and non-subscribers alike. Second, the comments are *not* linked to individually identifiable information, such as real names and social security numbers, only to usernames and avatars. Moreover, usernames do *not* link to potentially revealing information such as birth dates and e-mail addresses, and to my knowledge, BestGore contains no searchable database via which one can look up user info and statistics.

Although the data are not private information by definition, additional measures were taken to protect the anonymity of BestGore users. To this end, I also followed the ethical guidelines set forth by the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). For instance, whenever I suspected that a username *might* be the user’s actual name, or that an avatar *might* be a photo of the user in real life, I either excluded his/her comments from the write-up or changed the wording of the comment—without significantly altering the meaning—to render the comment difficult to search via traditional search engines like Google. In any case, I did not include usernames in my write-up of the results, nor did I provide links to BestGore photos and videos, underneath which are the accompanying user comments. In short, I endeavored to follow both procedural and substantive ethical guidelines to the best of my ability.

## Findings and Analyses

### *Pleasures and Purposes*

One of the apparent pleasures of watching content on BestGore.com is humor. This corresponds roughly with Tait's (2008) amoral gaze, but unlike her sample, for whom it is the least frequently enlisted response, it is rather pervasive on BestGore. But what is made fun of, and how, varies by the type of death depicted.

For accidents and suicides, both the decedent and the cause of death are subject to ridicule. In the case of accidents, highly outrageous or dramatic deaths provoke great hilarity among viewers, who exhibit *schadenfreude* (German for 'malicious joy'), or enjoyment derived from another's misfortune (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, n.d.; Sender, 2012, p. 69). One entry describes a 61 year old man in India who died inside his car when it exploded for reasons unknown. An accompanying video circles the wreckage and zooms in on the charred corpse. The comments section was flooded by culinary jokes poking fun at the mode of death and the decedent's ethnicity. 'This Tandoori is looking well overdone', posted a user; 'the Curry Gandhi', posted another. Others made religious quips like: 'The car became Islamic and imploded itself [...] This is Muhammad the martyr car.' In another video, a man commits suicide by leaping into the ocean from a cruise liner's deck. Unfortunately, the man's purported sexual orientation (the title of the video claims that he is 'gay') became the butt of many jokes: 'That was fabulous!'; 'Wonder when he hit the water if he didn't go Swish instead of Splash?'; 'You could say there was a certain queerness to it.' As these examples suggest, ridicule is especially intense when the decedent belongs to the Western hemisphere's 'other,' such as Muslims, persons of color, and homosexuals.

When death is due to natural causes, the target of humor is often someone or something other than the decedent. One video shows a Vietnamese woman on her death bed with a massive tumor protruding from her body, which doctors tried to remove surgically without success. The woman is surrounded by people chanting a Buddhist prayer to help ease her transition to the afterlife. BestGore users spared the dying woman ridicule, and many felt that she was made to suffer needlessly. One user remarked: 'We wouldn't allow a dog or a horse to suffer like that, yet they misguidedly prolong that poor woman's agony [...] Give her a shot of morphine and end her misery.' This comment, and others like it, suggest a pro-euthanasia stance in which the termination of a life is permissible when the physical suffering is too great. Because the woman is protected from *schadenfreude* by her illness, users ridicule the Buddhist chant instead, with one particular post—'Is it me, or does it sound like they're chanting "I need a fuck"?!'—eliciting uproarious laughter from other users. We also see this in responses to the autopsy of a Colombian teenager who died of dengue fever, with users poking fun at the pathologist ('You know he uses that same knife for his dinner') or the autopsy itself ('Baby ribs anyone?'), but not the horrible manner in which the decedent expired.

Like natural deaths, homicides also elicit sympathetic reactions that target *select* features of the image or footage—as opposed to accidents and suicides, which provoke

unsympathetic responses that indiscriminately target everything within the frame: background and foreground, decedent as well as cause. This is not to say that victims of homicides and natural deaths are *never* ridiculed, only that they are made fun of gingerly. Such jokes typically single out some trivial detail, insofar as it has no bearing on the death, like the ‘awful Bieber haircut’ of an innocent Brazilian teenager who was killed in a massive police assault. However, when the decedent is judged to have brought upon his or her own demise, the immunity typically afforded victims of homicides or natural causes is revoked. Observe the following response to post-mortem photographs of two heroin addicts who succumbed to AIDS: ‘I feel no pity for these people. Their addictions and AIDS resulted from their own decisions. They got exactly what was coming for them: death. Pathetic.’

So far, I have addressed the hilarity BestGore users derive from viewing violent content, and the ways humor varies by mode of death. Though less frequent, two additional pleasures separate from humor and *schadenfreude* are worth noting here. The first is a detective ‘whodunit’ or ‘howdunit’ mindset that recurs in responses to suicides and homicides. This involves attempting to reconstruct the scene of a death or crime, or probing the psyche of the decedent or killer based on available evidence. For example, several users impute ambivalence to a man who hanged himself given the presence of blood on the wall in several photographs, which they deem uncharacteristic of suicides by hanging. They reckon the decedent had ‘changed his mind at the last minute, [but] the wheels on that box slid out from underneath him.’ Others suspect foul play, suggesting that the ‘fishy’ looking character in one of the photographs had done the deed and made the murder look like a suicide.

The other pleasure is a *scientific gaze* that is immensely fascinated with the workings of the human body. In response to the videotaped autopsy of a Colombian teenager who died of dengue fever, one user reminisces about his/her time as a medical student, writing: ‘just looking at the bodies, it was like they were sleeping while you’re touching their insides ... It was amazing.’ Unsurprisingly, this scientific gaze is directed at images of natural deaths, though it is also evident in responses to an attempted murder that left the victim for dead. As one user writes: ‘watching his insides move was a breath-taking sight ... tragically beautiful.’

As I have mentioned, BestGore.com prides itself in giving access to ‘unadulterated truth’, and many users cite this as motivation for visiting the site. In response to one of the aforementioned videos, a user writes that BestGore is ‘impartial and reveals the truth before the “mainstream” media even, or ever, dare to.’ Another says that ‘websites like BG hit you full in the face with reality; forcing you to deal with it rather than pretend it doesn’t exist.’ In other words, users go to BestGore to encounter that which legacy media have whitewashed, thereby exhibiting what Tait (2008) calls the entitled gaze. One could also say that these users derive pleasure from uncovering truths, and in doing so, proving themselves to be more knowledgeable than the general population. Another’s suffering, then, becomes a means of bolstering one’s own position.

But the encounter between viewers and ‘the real’ does not stop at the moment of reception; viewers would ‘speak [their] minds freely’ and criticize systems of power that they think perpetuate senseless suffering. Such responses frequently accompany coverage of homicides and natural deaths. For instance, in reaction to the murder of three innocent civilians by a ‘trigger-happy’ police officer, a user remarks: ‘this is what happens when only PoPo have the guns and we can’t shoot back and make them shit their pants. civilians get slaughtered and nobody gives a fuck and no one is held accountable.’ Another user, responding to the post-mortem images of the two AIDS victims described earlier, criticizes the pharmaceutical complex for allegedly withholding cures and making obscene amounts of money by prolonging sick people’s suffering: ‘Big Pharma must have been rubbing their hands together when this particular disease came on the scene!’

An encounter with the so-called real is not without adverse consequences, however. While Tait accounts for this with her vulnerable gaze, she does not acknowledge that the entitled gaze and the vulnerable gaze can occur simultaneously. Notice the following post by a long-time BestGore user:

the world is becoming increasingly insane with all the escalating violence and disrespect. i grow weary of it and always saying WTF to myself. it’s very difficult to avoid depression when you witness the REALITY of this site [...] all i can do is shake my head.

What is depressing is not the sight of graphic violence per se, but the realization that violence is rampant and one can do little or nothing about it. When a confused user asks the above poster, ‘how are you disturbed by gore after all these years? i don’t understand’, another user answers: ‘he is not disturbed by the gore but by the harshness of reality itself. A situation I can fully understand because I am very much the same.’

Several users exhibit what psychologists call secondary or vicarious traumatization (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Lerias & Byrne, 2003; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). This refers to trauma experienced indirectly, via verbal or visual portrayals of other people’s suffering, as opposed to *primary* trauma, which implies direct exposure. It is a cumulative process, meaning single exposure is not enough. Several factors contribute to vicarious trauma, including the duration of exposure, the intensity and severity of the raw materials encountered, the listener or viewer’s (in)ability to change the victim’s predicament, and the extent to which the viewer is empathetic—all of which are evident in BestGore users’ responses. Many users report feeling as if their taken-for-granted assumptions about life have been assailed. One describes it as an ‘existential crisis’ that ‘forces us to reinterpret what we know and question how we should go forward.’ Another expresses feeling lonely upon realizing that ‘we now hold thoughts and opinions that differ from the majority.’ In light of these examples, humor takes on an additional inflection: as a possible means of coping with ‘existential crises’ and buttressing damage to the self. These examples also

show self-aggrandizement and martyrdom operating simultaneously, in that the users now know more than the majority, but have paid a steep price for such knowledge.

While viewing images of death can indeed be traumatizing, BestGore users also report emotional and psychological relief as a *result* of accessing the site. The ways in which relief is experienced are manifold. For some, the gruesome content serves as a distraction from personal problems: 'BG definitely helps, take my mind [off] my own shit when you see the glory of BG and how much [worse] life can be.' In cases like this, relief is brought upon by comparing one's misfortune with that of another. For others, the reminder that all life must end is comforting. This is especially true of users who are experiencing immense physical or psychological pain, including those who are suicidal, terminally ill, or have injuries so debilitating they make life 'nearly impossible [...] to love.' Consider the following post by a man with cystic fibrosis, whose expected lifespan is between 13 and 27 years: 'I have what is considered a terminal illness, so whenever I feel like I no longer want to be here I can think about that and know that I won't be here as long as most people.' For this user and many others, BestGore makes one acutely aware that death is not only imminent, but with its arrival comes the end to one's suffering and a reprieve from further suffering.

The alarmist position would suggest that shock sites can compel vulnerable individuals to hasten their own demise. The logic is that the Internet, as a vector of what psychologists call 'suicide contagion' or 'the Werther effect' (Bartlett, 2014), will expose suicidal persons to triggering content and stir their attraction to suicide. However, this position ignores empirical support for the opposite viewpoint: that the contemplation of one's death can be restitutive, sometimes acting as a deterrent, for the acknowledgment of self-destructive feelings can quell the need to act upon them (Atwood, 2012; Ekman & Söderberg, 2009). For yet another contingent of BestGore users, relief comes from the sense of connection conversation provides. As one suicidal user writes: 'My suicidal thoughts have been so bad lately, I really needed a laugh. And you guys made me laugh so hard, thank you!' Such positive feelings are brought about by one's sense of belonging to a community.

### ***Community in BestGore.com***

As I have shown in the previous section, BestGore users often derive immense satisfaction from 'laughing at the expense of someone else's misfortune', as one user puts it. Yet morbid humor can also be a means of *bonding*, of fostering solidarity with other users. In fact, BestGore users primarily identify as members of the community by exhibiting a dark sense of humor, which garners approval from other users, who preface or book-end their response with emphatic laughter ('I laughed so hard tears stung my eyes!').

Though macabre, the communicative atmosphere of BestGore is generally friendly. The mean comments directed at subjects of shock content are rarely directed towards other users. Users are quick to apologize for slight offenses, and they are just as quick to dismiss the need for apologies. Communication in BestGore can also be playful and flirtatious: 'I bet your box [slang for vagina] is yummy too', joked one user, to whom the recipient responds,

'I almost choked on my drink!' Terms of endearment like 'love', 'darling' and 'sweetheart' are frequently enlisted, and the use of highly suggestive language ('I absolutely love everyone here... some non-sexually') is received as well-meaning ('I love others on here too').

As Willson (2006) and Baym (2010) point out, community presupposes commonality and the sharing of tastes and interests. Obviously, BestGore users are bound together by their collective taste for the macabre. As their responses indicate ('touchdown!'; 'bahahahahaha'), they are excited by gratuitous violence approaching hyperrealism, such as the 'rarest of the rare' case of a man who was ejected from his vehicle during a traffic accident and launched twenty feet into the air, ultimately landing on a highway sign. Users are disappointed by the absence of gore ('got excited until I saw no gore'), with some preferring colored photographs over black-and-white ('vintage', as described by one user) because the latter is not nearly as bloody. But their shared tastes are not limited to shocking content, for BestGore users also share interests in other consumption fields, such as movies, music, and other pop-cultural artifacts. For example, in response to the highway ejection accident, users created a thread in which to share 'wonderful songs about car crashes', like 'Last Kiss' by Pearl Jam and 'Dead Man's Curve' by Jan and Dean; and another thread in which autobahn racers compared their highest speeds. This is not to say that BestGore users have identical interests, but there is harmony between shared and competing interests. In fact, when users signal divergent tastes, it is done so in a teasing or self-effacing manner: 'Beck sucks.... Krombacher is the real thing ☺'; 'You'll probably also hate the stuff I listen to then lol'.

Bonding on BestGore is not limited to the sharing of interests, however. Communication can be deeply personal, invoking views on human relationships and life. For example, in one thread, two male users discuss parenthood. The younger of the two expresses doubt about becoming a 'loving' father, to which the older one replies: 'You'd be surprised what you're capable of if it's dropped in your lap.' Disclosures about the self engender not only trust but a sense of shared history, so that special occasions such as birthdays are remembered and celebrated, losses are mourned, and absences felt. When one user resumes posting after an extended period of absence, another user asks where s/he has been, to which s/he responds: 'thanks for acknowledging my absence. i feel special again'.

Communication in BestGore can be highly emotional. For instance, within the comments on suicide videos, several users confess that they too have had suicidal thoughts. One such user had apparently suffered multiple interpersonal losses—a divorce and his best friend's death—and an injury so debilitating it compromised his ability to work. He attempted suicide numerous times and continues to harbor a death wish. His disclosure was met with a profusion of esteem and emotional support, thus exhibiting what Willson (2006) refers to as reciprocity. One user writes, 'I would like you to know I like you very much, the feelings are real.' '[Y]ou love us and you are stuck here with us', writes another. The man's disclosure led to further disclosures, which convey the message that he is not alone in his

suffering. A respondent reveals that he is terminally ill with cystic fibrosis, and two others mention knowing someone who either lives with or has died from CF. Another shares his own history of injury and loss, and writes to the original poster: 'I'm living proof as you are bad [shit] happens to people as a test to see who the true fighters are and in my opinion you are cuz you haven't ended it yet.' The level of support afforded the suicidal user might seem ironic given that he and other users make fun of actual suicides. But two factors make him deserving of support in the eyes of other users. First, he is not a stranger but a ratified member of the community. Second, he has not yet crossed the threshold between life and death, so his continuing aliveness is interpreted as valiant struggle.

Reciprocity in BestGore can also take the form of instrumental and informational support. After viewing CCTV footage in which a disgruntled police officer shoots the acquaintances of an ex-girlfriend, whom he is stalking, a female user reveals her own dilemma involving a stalker. This user has apparently received 'hundreds of messages', phone calls to her workplace, sex toys on her doorstep, and videotaped declarations of love from her stalker. Too scared to leave her house or sleep peacefully at night, she turns to other BestGore users for help. Several users suggest purchasing a weapon ('Something like a 380. Or a 38 special') and obtaining a restraining order. They advise against ignoring the problem ('Don't shrug it off and think he'll go away'), urging the user to enlist the help of friends, family members, and co-workers 'so you have those extra pairs of eyes.' Several respondents claim to have had run-ins with stalkers themselves, lending authenticity to their advice and expressions of concern. Their comments meet the criteria of 'authentic talk' (Sender, 2012, p. 115), which presents genuine feelings and experiences in ways that do not seem contrived or performed. At the end of the thread, the stalked user thanks her virtual 'family' and reassures them that she now sleeps with a 'big ass knife' next to her bed. The level of support BestGore users afford one another is unsurprising when one considers that the shared object of interest is distasteful to most people. To participate in the site is to admit that one is interested in taboo content, and the sense of kinship and vulnerability that arises from such a confession could facilitate highly personal discussions of other taboo subjects, including victimization and suicide.

One of the cornerstones of community is shared values and beliefs. Within the context of BestGore, what is shared is a particular model of the *mortal economy* (Aaron, 2015; Butler, 2006), in which some lives are deemed more livable, and some deaths more grievable, than others. Specifically, users judge the value of a life based on the person's presumed innocence, so that the innocent ranks high on the mortal economy while the guilty ranks low. Children are generally considered blameless, and consistent with the literature, are the 'most likely to stimulate an empathetic response' (Orgad, 2012, p. 66). For example, BestGore users expressed outrage at the killing of two innocent teenagers during a large-scale police assault on a Brazilian neighborhood, where the assailants of a murdered police officer had supposedly gone into hiding. 'Which of these two young fellows did you think still had a fighting chance in this hard cruel world?' asked one user. 'How does one armed robbery mean that everyone in a particular neighborhood is guilty?' asked another.

But when the victim is presumed guilty of a heinous crime, BestGore users show no sympathy. A video from the Philippines shows the aftermath of street justice that left an ex-convict for dead. The man suffered deep knife wounds to his back, shoulders, and head. His body is drenched in blood, and with every laborious breath his intestines stirred under his skin. Because children were among his alleged victims, BestGore users deemed him beyond forgiveness. ‘Some scumbags deserve this treatment’, wrote one user. ‘Eye for an eye tooth for a tooth.’

It is apparent from the data that BestGore users do not view all human lives as equal. Unfortunately, members of marginalized communities are also placed on the lower rungs of the mortal economy. For example, in response to the video of a gay man jumping into the ocean from a cruise liner’s deck, several users write: ‘this was all this fairy’s fault’; ‘the fucken fag hits the water where he belongs’; ‘let’s hope his body doesn’t damage the ship’s propellers.’ Together, these derogatory remarks imply a communal view that homosexuals are responsible for the tragedy befalling them, and that a gay man’s life is less valuable than an inanimate object. That the man committed suicide makes his death even less tragic to BestGore users, suggesting that suicides also rank low in the mortal economy. This is consistent with my finding that suicides are *never* spared ridicule. It is also consistent with Leonard and Toller’s (2012) finding that suicides only elicit sympathy when the decedent is young, attractive, successful, or exhibited potential in life. Additionally, it corroborates contemporary tendencies to locate moral failure among victims of suicide (Hecht, 2013).

Countless other examples of prejudicial comments abound in BestGore. Speaking of a minivan accident in Thailand that claimed the lives of four people, a user writes: ‘Four Thais offed in one crash? Somebody give this driver a tip!’ With regards to the street justice video described above, a user asks: ‘What does a Philippine kidney go for these days? One flip-flop... maybe two?’ A respondent jokingly replies: ‘12 lumpias [spring rolls] to one kidney where a native is involved ... a tourist kidney however usually goes for 24 lumpias.’ Another suggests buying a Southeast Asian slave, so that ‘you’ll have a body full of organs to harvest!’ Though meant to be read as jokes, these comments betray a view of humanity in which the life of the ‘other’ is deemed less valuable, if not valueless. An interesting tension thus emerges: on the one hand, by exhibiting vulnerability and care towards one another, BestGore users challenge popular stereotypes that shock site users are immoral, misanthropic, and feed on the misfortunes of others. On the other hand, their prejudicial comment-making shows that there is a limit to their compassion and empathy, with members of the in-group and innocent victims of human tragedies as the primary beneficiaries.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

The content of BestGore.com offers viewers a variety of pleasures and purposes. Chief among them is humor, which corresponds to Tait’s (2008) amoral gaze, though the target of ridicule varies by mode of death. Deaths by natural causes and homicides are more likely to induce sympathy, and less likely to elicit schadenfreude, than suicides and accidental

deaths. In the event that they are ridiculed, the target is often something or someone other than the decedent. However, this immunity is revoked when the decedent is judged to have brought upon his or her own demise due to a perceived moral failing. Other pleasures include the adoption of a detective mindset, which attempts to reconstruct the scene of a death or crime, and a scientific gaze that finds fascination with the workings and frailties of the human body.

Interestingly, the notion that gore or death is as titillating as conventional pornography is not supported by my data. Of the 600 user-generated comments analyzed, only *one* is of a sexual nature ('He got a nice cock. Shame it to go to waste now, I would like it inside me'), but even this was deemed too crass by other BestGore users. One might then wonder why BestGore features advertisements for conventional porn. It can be argued that by invoking 'the old mythology regarding snuff and its purported links to the outer fringes of the sex industry' (Astley, 2016, p. 165), BestGore is able to lay claims to subcultural authenticity.

BestGore users cite access to unadulterated truth as motivation for visiting the site. This impassions them to criticize larger systems of power that perpetuate suffering, although an encounter with the so-called real is not without a price, with several users reporting symptoms of vicarious trauma. Thus, Tait's entitled gaze and vulnerable gaze are not mutually exclusive, but can occur simultaneously. However, this does not mean we should return to a view of audiences as a weak-willed and vulnerable 'mass' (Butsch, 2011). Viewing death and dying can also provide relief to users, such as distraction from life's woes, a reminder that all suffering, including one's own, has an end, and the opportunity to take part in community.

Given that the object of interest is taboo, outside the sphere of legitimate culture due to its hyperviolence, one is unlikely to find such a shared space offline. BestGore users enact membership in this community in a variety of ways. They exhibit humor towards the subjects of shock content (shared practice), and express approval of other users' dark sense of humor (recognition). Their interactional style can generally be described as friendly, playful, and flirtatious. They are bound together by their collective taste for the macabre (commonality), privileging gratuitous violence over content that is censored or subdued. Users also share interests in consumption fields outside of 'body horror' (Tait, 2008), such as music, movies, and other pop-cultural artifacts.

Communication in BestGore can at times be highly emotional. Users bond by sharing their outlook on human relationships and life, and by revealing myriad personal struggles, including thoughts of suicide, run-ins with stalkers, terminal illness, bereavement, relational rupture, and other assaults on ontological security. These disclosures are met by an outpouring of informational and emotional support, which engender trust and connection. By sharing the deeply personal, members lend authenticity to their expressions of concern, and communicate to fellow users that they are not alone in their suffering.

The diffusion of digital technologies initially led to widespread fears about the threat they posed to traditional, place-based communities. As Bird (2003) observed, online

communities were often depicted as hollow, impersonal, and rife with deception. Even Willson (2006) spoke of post-modern cybercommunities as being more superficial and having less comprehensive bonding, because members share fewer similarities than their offline counterparts. This narrative has been challenged over the years by many scholars, including Bird (2003) and Baym (2010), who argue that online communities can provide a deep sense of connection, support during moments of crisis, and friends with whom to create shared memories and histories. The emancipatory potential of cybercommunities has also been acknowledged by Moores (2005), who argues that new media can actually pluralize our sense of place. The results of the present study certainly lend empirical support to some of these assertions.

But as Joseph (2002) cautions, rhapsodic accounts of community need to be tempered. This does not mean returning to a state of panic, but a nuanced view of community that acknowledges both emancipatory and worrisome dimensions. Within the context of BestGore, users exhibit vicious tendencies and express highly prejudicial attitudes toward members of minority groups. That users collectively espouse values that make permissible the denigration of the other, certainly offsets utopian hopes that differences disappear online—a popular rhetoric Katz and Rice (2002) had observed when the Internet became a consumer technology. In BestGore, differences are foregrounded rather than relegated to the background.

The present inquiry suggests several directions for future study. First, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the themes identified here, individual or focus group interviews with BestGore users should be conducted. Second, a comparison of shock sites is sorely needed given that my findings differed markedly from Tait's (2008) in several respects. For instance, humor is the most frequently enlisted response in BestGore, but the least frequently enlisted in LiveLeak, suggesting different values at work. A comparative study can shed more light on both general and particular features of shock sites.

Third, as the present study shows, even within such a denigrated cultural form users discriminate between content that is tasteful and content that is patently offensive. Thus, one could study hierarchies of taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1997), and how they serve as markers of distinction and affiliation within and across shock sites. One could also unpack the relationship between shock fandom and other subcultural artifacts. In his study of *Dead Alive's Traces of Death* VHS series, which collates snuff into feature-length videos, Walker (2016) observed that fans of the series were also consummate fans of extreme heavy metal, which he attributes to the two genres' shared "themes of violence, sexual depravity, and human expiration" (p. 149). Whether or not similar articulations can be found in BestGore and other such sites is worth investigating.

Lastly, because only vocal members, or 'superparticipants' (Graham & Wright, 2014), of the BestGore community are represented here, future research can inquire into more peripheral forms of participation, such as accessing content without posting, or providing content without engaging in forums. This is especially pertinent to users who are unable to read or write in English, and more especially, to users who belong to those groups that are

discriminated against. One might wonder if members of out-groups do in fact participate in prejudicial comment-making, perhaps in ways that do not call attention to themselves, and the extent to which their participation might be driven by internalized self-hatred. The exploration of such avenues would certainly yield fruitful results.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Jones (2010) makes a distinction between 'shock sites' and 'sites with shock content.' The former consists of a single image, video, or .gif, while the latter contains a plethora of shocking imagery and relevant hypertext such as forum posts. In this paper, I do not make such a distinction and refer to both as 'shock sites.'

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Mark Marek, the owner and creator of BestGore.com, is on trial for the distribution and circulation of obscene material for having posted the 10-minute video of Chinese international student Jun Lin's dismemberment by Luka Magnotta. Marek himself admitted in court that posting the video was 'obscene' and 'went beyond what served the public good' (Reith, 2016).