

ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

Virtual Ethnography of r/cozyplaces

Introduction:

The subreddit, r/cozyplaces, is characterized by sharing places deemed “cozy” by community members through the process of upvoting. This creates core values within the subreddit that determine the specific elements needed to establish a cozy place. As a result, cozy places can include almost anything, from bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, patios, and balconies, as long as certain elements are maintained. Common items that make an area appear cozy are pets, fuzzy blankets, pillows, plants, and fairy lights or candles.

In r/cozyplaces, members seek to connect and relate with original content creators through comments. Typically, members will go out of their way to inquire about the location of a cozy place, the elements that comprise the cozy place, and express their thoughts as well as feelings regarding the cozy area. Thus, members seek to relate to one another in any way they can. Significantly, this goal to relate and connect is associated with our socioeconomic levels.

Wealth affects what a person views as cozy, recommends other users to buy to make a place cozier, their physical experiences with cozy places, and awareness of the accessibility of the cozy place. Users’ socioeconomic status affects the content of their comments and their perceptions of what level of coziness is personally achievable for themselves. This influences member’s ideas in regards to their perfect cozy place. Ultimately, the ideals of members derived from community interactions produce the core values of the subreddit.

Methods and Ethical Considerations:

As I conducted my primary research, I observed threads primarily using non-participant observation. In particular, I looked at three specific threads- one regarding an image of an indoor porch in autumn with a beautiful view of the lake, mountains, and orange leaves; another involved a small city backyard patio with various plants aligned against the fence. In contrast, the last thread I observed was a

ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

meme discussing the values of the subreddit itself, an unusual deviation from the typical posts. I observed each thread for a total of one hour, with thirty minutes each on October 8th, fifteen minutes each on October 15th, and fifteen minutes each on October 23rd. After reviewing the posts and their captions, I analyzed the comments and compared their similarities and differences while paying particular attention to emerging patterns as well as commonly shared beliefs. I choose this form of primary observation to limit any possible changes in behavior that may result from my participation. My goal was to examine three distinctive threads and members' interactions with them without any planned interference.

Results:

In the first thread, the image is an indoor porch featuring a royal blue rug with white dandelions, a dark cherry bench and matching chair with cream cushions against the frame, as well as a small white patio table with identical chairs. Beyond the porch's windows is the sparkling lake with mountains and yellow leaves outlining the water's edge on all sides. The sun is beginning to set in the distance, and fluffy white clouds sprinkle across the light blue sky. There is also a tree branch hanging low towards the porch window, making it appear somewhat secluded. Interestingly, several comments inquire about the location of the cozy place, the animals that live around the area, and some commenters even shared their personal experiences with wildlife and the location in which the post originates. For example, u/ChongoLikRock stated, "Very jealous of your critter friends. I'm guessing your parents live somewhere in Canada or North-Eastern U.S.?" Another user, u/dimoff, said, "I never liked fall until I spent one in Connecticut." U/kassypassy exclaims, "Ok I am IN LOVE with that beige chair with the wood frame! Any chance you know where they got it?" Lastly, the original poster, u/devilsbronco said in response to a commenter asking about animals seen near the porch, "We've seen bald eagles, great blue heron, muskrats, beavers, turtles, ducks, geese. It's amazing how many creatures the water attracts".

The second thread includes an image of a small city backyard patio with gorgeous floor stenciling that creates the appearance of a tiled floor, which is usually more expensive. The owners of the cozy space incorporated a neutral color

ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

scheme with greys, cream, and honey. The white back fence has some artificial green leaves, and a honey wood table in the middle, parallel to a matching honey wood couch with dark grey cushions and white and grey patterned pillows. On the other side of the table are two honey-colored circular chairs with a white fur pillow on each one, a modern-like element. The side fence has a black and white designated plant table, and behind it, there is a honey weaved swing chair with cream-colored cushions. Behind the side fence is a white brick wall stained with black and grey marks, most likely due to time and use.

This is also an indicator of a less affluent area and lower socioeconomic status. As previously mentioned, the commenters all seek to relate and identify with one another as well as create their own coziness. They discuss the location of the cozy place and the size of the cozy area. U/skip6235 claimed, "I feel you there. My 'outdoor space' consists of balcony that's about 3 ft by 6 inches." U/dontcallmewoody said, "What is 'outdoor space' haha. We don't even have a fire escape because we're first floor." Other comments compared the patio to being located in an alley due to the rowboat home located next to the fence with apparent marks of use and age. U/timk85 said, "Is this in a small downtown alley or something? I'm confused by the surrounding wall textures. Also, is this covered? If not, how do you handle the rain?"

The third thread is a meme consisting of a man with long hair wrapped in a brown and tan robe. The man appears to be looking up with a serious expression on his face, as though he is contemplating or questioning something of importance. Surrounding him is a grey background with pillows, blankets, fairy lights, and plants. On the image itself, the text is in black with quotation marks surrounding it, suggesting that the original poster does not agree with the opinion expressed on the meme. The text reads, "Ugh, r/cozyplaces is just fairy lights, blankets, and plants." The text at the bottom of the screen is white and does not have quotations, indicating that it expresses the original poster's opinion. The text reads, "That's.. why i'm here." The comments below this post express the perceptiveness of the community. Members are implored to reflect on themselves, especially on how they function together in the community. They share their failures in creating their cozy place or things they wish they could achieve but cannot. U/primarilygreen stated, "I can barely keep one small pot of bamboo alive and well. Those living room greenhouses are gorgeous, but damn that's a lot of pressure." Other users share

ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

complaints about other commenters who are never happy with the subreddit and always seem to be complaining. U/TheClockReads2113 claimed, "Seriously, there is almost no pleasing this sub. Blankets, Candles, Fairy lights, Books, Plants. Sub Response: 'Ugh! So many blankets. What a fire hazard! Geez, add some more plants, why don't ya?' Beautiful mountain views, Beachfront properties, Gorgeous libraries or reading nooks with plush leather armchairs, and other elegant interiors. Sub Response: 'Ugh! Ok, Mr. Moneybags... Money can't buy coziness! Congratu-frickin'-lations, you're rich. Get out of here, you braggart!'" This comment reinforces the idea that everyone has their own version of what cozy looks like, but it always has a certain essence. Additionally, it addresses wealthy-looking cozy places, the common characteristics continuously seen in cozy posts that are consistently upvoted for, and expressed a dislike for reposts and sob stories.

Analysis:

In the thread with the sparkling lake, u/ChongoLikRock's comment regarding the location of the cozy place suggests that the user is attempting to uncover the photo's location to determine whether it is possible if they can live there. This idea is reinforced by the beginning of u/ChongoLikRock's comment when he says that he is jealous of the critters that live in the area. U/kassypassy asked where the cherry wood frame chair with beige cushions was purchased, indicating a desire to possess the item. Both comments exhibit the commenter's socioeconomic status, as they express a possible capability to obtain a similar level of coziness. Additionally, the view in the photo is similar to those in movies or stories. It creates a sense of coziness by invoking feelings of calm, serenity, privacy, safety, and security among viewers. Thus, the place in question alludes to wealth as it creates a secluded and safe area that one may only see in a movie or imagine in a novel. It appears unrealistic, and its associated values difficult to obtain.

U/dimoff commented about their personal experience in New England, particularly how the scenery allowed them to fully appreciate the season of autumn. Notably, the commenter addresses the content creator as they are attempting to relate to u/devilsbronco's experience with the perceived cozy place. Similarly, u/devilsbronco decides to answer a question regarding the animals that

ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

live near the porch and provides members a detailed list. Here, both the commenter and content creator form connections with their peers, specifically ones that share positive sentiment towards the post.

The effects of socioeconomic status are also expressed in the thread consisting of a “small city back patio”. For example, u/skip6235 and u/dontcallmewoody claimed that they can relate to the original poster, as their outdoor spaces are tiny. Although we cannot physically observe their claims, they both attempt to relate to the content creator. They use their limited house space and exaggeration to form a meaningful connection about their socioeconomic status instead of insinuating a deep desire for a larger space. However, u/timk85 takes a different approach, as they question whether the patio is located within an alley and how the homeowner is able to prevent rain from affecting the furniture pictured. These blatant questions suggest that u/timk85 has a higher status of perceived wealth compared to the original poster. In particular, u/timk85’s alley insult unfavorably reflects upon the content creator. A commenter who previously experienced a similar living situation would not point out an apparent class division that may make others look down upon them. U/timk85 raises an interesting question about the functionality of the cozy place with his weather-related question. This inquiry builds upon other ideas shared within the thread, signaling the use of one of the many values of r/cozyplaces. Despite a socioeconomic class difference, the commenter still seeks to connect with the original poster through inquiry (possibly the only way they know how).

The last thread observed explores the community’s self-perception, instead of the typical cozy place post. Community members reflect on themselves, especially on how they function together in the community. Members like u/primarilygreen were able to form connections with several community members by voicing their downfalls (her lack of ability to keep bamboo alive). Interestingly, several members shared her concerns, especially since plants are considered one of the basic components of a typical cozy place. These components were established through the upvoting process with the desire to create overall accessibility to coziness. Most people can afford to purchase a plant, fluffy blanket, pillows, etc., making them a great starting point for someone who feels lost or overwhelmed by the subreddit’s various cozy places. In addition, u/TheClockReads2113 shared complaints about other commenters who are never

ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

happy with the subreddit, who claim that beautiful views are only for rich people and that coziness is more than just a couple of blankets, plants, pillows, and fairy lights. This highlights the different coziness levels experienced by individuals who view them differently based on their experiences and socioeconomic status.

The effects of wealth cannot be pigeonholed into a specific class level, such as upper/middle/lower class. Socioeconomic class levels cannot be easily defined, as different regions in the United States have significant cost disparities. According to Jo Craven McGinty, in her article, "Middle Class, Undefined: How Purchasing Power Affects Perceptions of Wealth", the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis determined that the differences in prices for goods among all 50 states and the District of Columbia was almost 32 percentage points and that rent prices varied by 97 percentage points. There are no "one-size-fits-all numbers" (Craven McGinty). Ultimately, a dollar can take a person farther in rural areas compared to cities. "Thomas A. Hirschl, a professor at Cornell University, pays less in mortgage for his four-bedroom home in Ithaca, N.Y., than his son pays in rent for a one-room apartment located a few hours south in Brooklyn" (Craven McGinty). These differences in prices affect the goals people can fulfill, such as buying a house or going on family vacations. Thus, a person's socioeconomic status is defined by their relative location, which functions in conjunction with price level. What people can afford affects their perceptions of what is cozy, what they would recommend others to buy to make a place cozier, their physical experiences with cozy places, and awareness of the accessibility of the cozy place. These perceptions ultimately contribute to the ideals of the subreddit, r/cozypaces.

The obsession with wealth creeps into other forms of social media, such as Instagram. The article, Flex Culture for Rent, informs readers about the flex culture on social media, primarily Instagram, and how many influencers over-represent their wealth by renting sports cars and taking photos at open-houses for mansions and penthouses (Marie-Danielle Smith). Furthermore, the article explores the cottage industry dedicated to faking wealth and creating a character or persona on the internet. A developmental psychologist at the University of British Columbia, Jennifer Shapka, raised concerns about young teens' "influencer" status and how their inauthentic online identities may prevent them from forming real relationships (Marie-Danielle Smith). These young influencers create a false sense of cozy that they project as achievable for themselves. Additionally, influencer's followers will

ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

admire the influencer and their projected socioeconomic status, as well as strive to create a similar aura of wealth for themselves. People look up to their role models and want to emulate them. In r/cozyplaces, the role model is not a person but rather the shared cozy place, discussed by community members and adopted by users who believe that they can achieve a similar coziness level. On the other hand, flex culture operates differently as community members develop a lasting desire to become their ideal influencer, despite whether or not that lifestyle is healthy and affordable for the admirer.

Discussion:

Our lives are filled with defining factors- gender, ethnicity, physical appearances, and socioeconomic status. These factors vary by importance based on the community in which they live, whether virtual or in person. As my research progressed, I discovered the greater influence of wealth on social media platforms, such as Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and even Tik Tok. Instagram users' feed will be filled with the content they continuously engage in based on their interests. Let's say I was obsessed with the Kardashian-Jenner clan. My Instagram feed would include their posts and various fan accounts. I would most likely, accessorize and curate my outfits to appear just as fashion-forward as theirs and buy their products. However, this endeavor would require me to have a spending income that allows me to donate significant sums of money to my infatuation. This same concept can be applied to Pinterest users who create boards based on their purchasing power capabilities or expected future wealth. Regarding Twitter, a person's socioeconomic status determines which tweets they find funny, who they're following (most likely people with similar backgrounds/beliefs), and which political issues/candidates they support. Lastly, Tik Tok uses flex culture to promote large and expensive-looking homes on one end and cheap knock-offs of popular expensive products on the other (like Shein, Misguided, and Amazon dupes of Lululemon). Social status and wealth appear interrelated and directly correspond with each other.

ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

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ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

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ESSAY 3 PHASE 2

Student 3 • Prof. Mani • Fall 2020

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