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Bird's Eye View: The Construction of Identity and Community on Social Media among Cirque du Soleil Performers

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**Bird's Eye View: The Construction of Identity and Community on Social Media among
Cirque du Soleil Performers**

A Thesis

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Katrina Sandefer

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INTRODUCTION

Although the circus has been around for hundreds of years, it is still a large part of the entertainment industry that draws substantial crowds and interest. Cirque du Soleil— a Québécois contemporary circus— attracts a lot of attention because of its aerial and acrobatic performances. Fans can experience the circus in person at a performance, but they can also interact online by watching performers on social media. TikTok— a social media platform where creators share videos up to three minutes in length— is a great place for Cirque du Soleil performers to gain a new audience and interact with their fans.

In this research, I sought to answer the following questions: How are Cirque du Soleil performers negotiating their self-identity on TikTok? What are the shared values of the Cirque du Soleil community on TikTok? How do the interactions between Cirque du Soleil performers and their followers further shape their community?

Previous research focuses on why individuals join Cirque du Soleil but has done little to evaluate how performers construct a shared community ethos while expressing themselves individually. This research will do both within the context of interactions with their large fan base on social media.

BACKGROUND

The tradition of the circus in Canada and the United States is represented in its big-tops and nomadism, the colorful tents popping up in towns across the United States with a brigade of circus performers and animals following closely behind. Names like *P.T. Barnum & Bailey*, or *Ringling Brothers* represent the “earliest history of the circus” in North America (Johnson 2012, 1). It is important to note that when referring to the traditional circus, it is in reference to the traditional North American circus, one that was run by businessmen. These notable pioneers

offered a sanctuary for “nonconformity both in physical appearance and abilities,” (1). That sanctuary brought about a close-knit community for those ostracized from society; the circus became a family that closed its doors to those who did not face similar struggles in society, which Mark Schreiber explains in his 2005 book. Schreiber notes that in Europe, the circus was a family business that was passed down throughout generations, making it so that “most circus performers come from circus families” (Schreiber 2005, 54). This made it difficult for outsiders to gain entrance into the circus community, meaning there was very little innovation and change within the traditional circus. During the late 1800s in North America, while the traveling circus was run more like a business and they recruited ostracized members of society along with circus families, the circus was still closed to outsiders like in Europe. The idea that the circus was a closed practice and only recruited performers from within the community extended into how they designed their shows. Tradition and adherence to the traditional acts and performances was ingrained into the practices of the circus. According to Rantisi, there were traditional ways of doing things and “for years and years... circus artists were doing tricks, and they were in a way cutting or closing the doors to other arts influences” (Leslie and Rantisi 2011, 1778). Instead of accepting inspiration from ballet, ice-skating, or other art forms, the traditional circus was resistant to allowing any other art form to influence their creative process. While this closed-door policy may have stifled creativity, it created an air of mystery that drew the public’s interest.

In this regard Cirque du Soleil, a contemporary circus, is loyal to tradition. According to Schreiber, devotion to mystery is one of the very few ways that Cirque du Soleil, a Québécois circus company that has reinvented and redesigned how modern circuses operate, alludes to their roots in the traditional circus. Since their beginning in the early 1980s—which is when the contemporary circus began to be normalized and more widespread—they have “sold more than

70 million tickets in more than 250 cities” according to Casadesus-Masanell and AuCoin (2010, 2). Regarding Casadesus- Masanell and AuCoin’s article that focuses on the business partnerships of Cirque du Soleil, it is obvious that Cirque du Soleil puts the show before business. Unlike the traditional circuses that were run like businesses, Cirque du Soleil has always been unwilling to make business deals that jeopardize their creative freedom; they have given up many lucrative deals over the years to maintain their creative license.

In 1984, Cirque du Soleil was founded using the “tradition of street performance and the appeal of circus” to redefine and reinvent the traditional circus according to Rantisi (Leslie and Rantisi 2011, 1776). Cirque du Soleil was able to approach their shows with diversity and innovation in mind as there were fewer traditional expectations from the creative directors. While “Cirque du Soleil never abandoned its nomadic roots,” they travel farther and substantially wider than the traditional circus (Casadesus-Masanell and AuCoin 2010, 6). Cirque du Soleil prides themselves on pushing and breaking down the boundaries of the traditional circus. The founding artists were “street performers rather than circus performers” and they never included any animals in their show (2). As the show had a very humble and modest beginning, they never had the money to pay for famous performers, so they instead cultivated a following of the Cirque du Soleil name rather than the artists’ names. This is a divergence from the traditional circus, where prima donna ringmasters and performers drew large crowds, which Johnson discusses in his article. Casadesus-Masanell and AuCoin argue that their strong aversion to relying on famed artists to draw crowds and interest based on financial necessity leads to a Cirque du Soleil not “[tolerating] neither prima donna artists nor prima donna creators” (4). This financial decision grew quickly into an ideological one that made up a part of Cirque du Soleil’s foundation. In Légar and Hurley’s 2011 article, they argue that the total dismissal of prima donna artists and

creators meant that “les artistes de Cirque ont besoin de fonctionner en équipe [the artists of Cirque [needed] to function as a team]” for the vision of Cirque du Soleil to work (Légar and Hurley 2011, 137-8).

Rather than recruiting circus performers from specific circus families like the traditional circus, Johnson explains that Cirque du Soleil recruits the best “conservatory-trained artists and Olympic gymnasts from around the world” (Johnson 2012, 2). This resulted in over a fourth of Cirque du Soleil’s permanent employees representing more than forty nationalities, according to Casadesus-Masanell and AuCoin. Rather than sticking with the same acts and performers like the traditional circus, Cirque du Soleil opens their doors to diversity and embraces innovation, allowing different art forms to influence their performances and training. They gained an influx of different cultures, acts, and backgrounds that allow Cirque du Soleil to attract new audiences and to continue to grow. Rantisi explains that Cirque du Soleil’s approach to “[bridging] the divide between... various art forms fosters a lively and dynamic corporate culture and a willingness to explore multiple paths” is innovative and forward-thinking (Leslie and Rantisi 2011, 1778). The incorporation of various art forms allows Cirque du Soleil to continue to evolve in their shows and their performances, reaching new audiences; “Diversity allows evolution to follow” according to Rantisi (1777); their openness to diversity and difference has given Cirque du Soleil access to a “large reservoir of cultural talent” that gives Cirque du Soleil the chance to innovate continually (1777). Casadesus-Masanell and AuCoin offer an example: *Kà*, one of Cirque du Soleil’s shows in Las Vegas, is a blend of “acrobatic feats, Capoeira dance, puppetry, projections, and martial arts” (Casadesus-Masanell and AuCoin 2010, 2). These aspects of their show are what set them apart from the traditional circus performances. The idea of opening their doors to other creative influences was one of the most radical changes Cirque du

Soleil made, according to Rantisi. Cirque du Soleil's willingness to explore multiple paths and step outside of the traditional circus changed circus arts forever; Cirque du Soleil and its redefining of the circus "have brought unprecedented attention and legitimacy to the circus arts," (Shaw 2017, 3).

Cirque du Soleil has not completely abandoned the traditional circus. Cirque du Soleil's willingness to embrace diversity and change are what sets it apart from the traditional circus, but there are still aspects of the traditional circus that are visible in every Cirque du Soleil performance. Johnson argues that the Cirque blends "traditional circus skills like acrobatics with the theatrical techniques," which has reinvigorated the public's interest in contemporary circus (Johnson 2012, 2). Bridging the gap between the traditional and contemporary circus allowed for Cirque du Soleil to interest a whole new audience.

One of the challenges with reinvention and evolution in the circus is that audience expectations rise the more Cirque du Soleil produces a show that seems impossible: "Once an aerial trick [is] mastered there were expectations" of greater tricks and more impressive feats that were better than the ones previously seen on stage (Tait 2014, 20).. In order to provide a good show, Amy Meyer argues in her 2014 article that performers are pushing physical boundaries to please the audiences. Cirque du Soleil and its artists pride themselves on their abilities to push themselves to the absolute limit for the sake of the performance to keep that audience continually interested. Hurley and Légar argue that Cirque du Soleil values skill and pushing boundaries, including the boundaries of the human body; « Le corps in extremis constitue le fondement de l'esthétique du Cirque » [The body in extremis constitutes the foundation of Cirque's aesthetic] (Hurley and Légar 2011, 137-8). Unfortunately, according to Nueman in 2018, there have been instances where Cirque du Soleil's artists have pushed past their limits during a performance,

being seriously injured and even losing their lives, although these instances are a rarity and taken very seriously by Cirque du Soleil.

The willingness to step outside the bounds of the traditional circus is shown through the performers as well, in how Cirque du Soleil performers often “take social risks as well as physical risks as their identities [as performers] step outside of socially defined gender roles” (Meyer 2014, 18). With the popularity of social media on the rise, Cirque du Soleil performers have been using these social media platforms—specifically Tik Tok—to share their experiences and give an inside look into their communities. Not only are they sharing their experience of Cirque du Soleil, they are sharing their experience of circus arts generally, revealing how circus arts have allowed them to shape their identity.

METHODOLOGY

To gain a broader understanding of the individual and community identities constructed by Cirque Du Soleil performers online, I focused on the social media presence of Cirque du Soleil performers on TikTok. I chose TikTok because a viewer can filter their content by searching topics, specific creators, or using a hashtag (a device that allows creators to sort their videos into categories for viewers to find easily). Tik Tok is a platform where creators (bloggers) can share video content that range in length from 15 seconds to three minutes. As TikTok is a large social media platform, I needed to employ different routes to find the Cirque du Soleil performers on TikTok. I relied on two methods: using the #cirquedusoleil to find performers using this hashtag and then Cirque du Soleil’s official Tiktok account. While Cirque du Soleil is a company that puts on in-person performances across the world, they have also created a community for themselves online where they can share their experiences and interact with other creators and fans. Often, they indicate that community by including #cirquedusoleil in the bio of

their videos. By searching for #cirquedusoleil on Tik Tok, one can find the Cirque du Soleil performers on Tik Tok. Of course, it is important to note that not all creators use hashtags. If a performer does not have the hashtag on their videos, one can still identify them by looking at their bio (a description of the creator that is found at the top of their page) that will include some type of reference to Cirque du Soleil. I used both of these approaches—one that targeted official Cirque du Soleil posts, and one that targeted more informal, self-identified Cirque du Soleil performers—because it is vital to “consult multiple sources when creating a sampling frame” (Hurwitz et al 2018, 535). This dual approach helped ensure a more complete picture of the community, rather than just the idealized version of the community that was approved by the Cirque du Soleil PR team.

I used the “following” tab—a part of every profile on Tiktok that lists what other profiles that person follows—to identify other Cirque du Soleil performers who are connected to one another on social media. The “following” tab lists everyone the performer follows (meaning more than just other performers), so it was an easily accessible list of performers; the reason that this is a useful list is that there was a high possibility that performers were following other performers they work with. I also looked at the comment section—a place where other people can comment on the video of the creator—to understand how Cirque du Soleil performers interact with their followers and other performers.

After finding performers, I looked through 209 videos—which included twenty-four different performers, Cirque du Soleil and Disney Parks’s company accounts—to gain a sense of what kinds of videos are commonly posted by performers. Once I had a data set, I began analysis. I started with a few initial codes that I derived from themes identified in the literature. I then utilized open coding by analyzing the data and adding additional codes until I hit the

saturation point of new terms, finalized my codebook, and then went back to ensure all the codes were applied uniformly. I coded the videos based on factors such as gender performance, personal and community understandings of fear, failure and safety, view of injuries, team dynamics, diversity, and body image.

In this data set there are three types of performances: live-performances, training, and street performances. Through looking at different types of performances and noting them in my code sheet, I gained a better understanding of what performers value based on what they are willing to post on social media. I used the note section of my code sheet to record interesting comments and actions to further note distinct patterns. I also used a different note section to summarize the comment section on each video and quoted important comments. Trends and similarities across creator's pages were documented in the notes section. There was a column that documented the sound of the video, another for the likes the video received, and another for the date the video was posted.

I looked at each of the codes and analyzed each independently, as well as analyzing how the codes interacted with one another. I also took into account how these codes create tension between individual and community values. In their 2021 article, Coman and Rothenbuhler explained that it is important to “commit to creating a deeper understanding of local knowledge to see commonalities across [this culture],” “while [remembering] not to generalize too much” (Coman and Rothenbuhler 2021, 4). The reason that it was so important not to generalize was that this data set is not a complete representation of the entire Cirque du Soleil community on Tik Tok as the platform gains new upload daily and videos are removed daily as well.

SOCIAL MEDIA & IDENTITY

Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1959 discusses human interaction as if every moment was a performance— “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” that occurred in the front and the back of the stage (Goffman 1959, 17). It is important to note that Goffman's definition of performer is an individual, not a circus artist (which is how the word will be used throughout this paper). He discusses the difference between the front and backstage of an individual's performance. The front stage is where a performer can wear a mask, allowing the performer to control how an audience perceives them throughout the entirety of the performance. The performer may conceal different aspects of their life or thoughts to portray a certain mask to gain a positive reaction from their audience. A great example of the front stage is social media. A performer can decide to post certain aspects of their life on social media but leave out the parts that the audience may not react positively to. One does not have to present their entire self over social media. Back stage is the complete opposite; it is the aspects of a performer's life that occur without an audience. It is where the performance is prepared; no audience member can be present backstage. An example of backstage is all the work that goes into a post on social media; the audience never sees the prep work that goes into every social media post.

The audience may try to understand if the front stage presentation is an honest representation. Goffman explains that it is natural for the audience “to feel that the impression the performer seeks to give may be true or false” (Goffman 1959, 22). If an audience member feels that they are on the receiving end of a false performance, they may react negatively. A social media example of this would be if a performer posted an apology video, but the audience perceived that the performer was lying and was not truly sorry.

In Erving Goffman's 1955 article, "On face-work: an analysis of ritual elements in social interaction," he discusses the ways in which individuals express themselves (Goffman 1955,7). He defines face as an image "of self-delineation in terms of approved social attributes" (7). Once an individual establishes a face, they are expected to sustain that impression and live up to that self-image. "To lose face" means to express oneself in the wrong face, or to present oneself outside of the established self-image (8).

In her 2015 article, Crystal Abidin talks about influencers and how they interact with their followers. Influencers are everyday Internet users that gain a large following on a social media platform who document their personal and sometimes professional lives on social media. Many Cirque du Soleil performers are influencers, as they have a large following on Tiktok (and other social media platforms). The casual way that influencers interact with their followers creates an intimacy and a higher level of trust and engagement, making the influencer more relatable. This perceived impression of exclusive, intimate exchange is what allows for both the audiences' and performer's sense of identity to be processed through said exchange. When the audience compares themselves to the performer, they are creating a sense of self. When the performer is making claims about themselves based on their understanding of their audience, they are processing their own identity.

While influencers are sharing their everyday life with their audience, they cannot share every aspect of every moment; in their 2022 article, Gratch and Gratch explain how individuals cannot post about every aspect of their lives, so the audience is missing pieces of what makes up their identity. On social media, self-identity is developed over time through different performances in a virtual space, which of course requires an audience. This idea is rather complex as self-identity must be processed through previously established identity markers in

society. Individuals then are limited in what they can construct and perform in virtual spaces regarding their identity. Also, it is very important to note that the construction of self-identity on social media is never complete and is always changing as the performer posts more videos that continue to develop their sense of self.

While all of the Cirque du Soleil performers on Tik Tok are individuals, they are also employed by Cirque du Soleil and have to maintain some sense of professionalism. In their 2017 article, Scolere and Pruchniewska talk about how professionals present themselves on social media. Professionals often take great care to create and maintain a specific brand when presenting themselves on social media. As more and more people engage with social media, it becomes more common for professionals to be online as well. Due to the lack of boundaries between the professionals and the public, it can be difficult for them to maintain distinct social boundaries.

GENDER

Gender and Body Types

In Erving Goffman's 1963 book "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity" he discusses stigma's role in society. He explains that society establishes how to categorize persons based on complementary attributes. Once society has categorized each person, stigma—an attribute that is deeply discrediting—comes into play. Stigmas are blemishes on an individual's character or a physical deformity. An individual has a blemish on their character if their actions or identity fit outside of the conventional expectations of society. An example would be a woman performing on an apparatus that is conventionally accepted by society as a male apparatus.

In the TikTok videos of Cirque du Soleil performers, there is a uniformity of body types, which suggests that they are not as diverse and open in their inclusion as presented. Harrison's definition of physicality—the performer is “strong, physical, charismatic, and well-toned”—was used throughout the coding process to define physicality (Harrison 2019, 25). Out of the 209 videos that are included in this data set, 207 videos fit this description. The uniformity of body types portrayed by Cirque du Soleil performers in these videos implies that Cirque du Soleil as a whole may value a specific body type in their hiring process. Of course, not every performer is on TikTok, so there could be other factors to consider. The fact that only 2 of the 209 videos do not fit the definition of physicality offered by Harrison is an indication that Cirque du Soleil is not as inclusive as they portray themselves to be in relation to diversity in the bodies they hire.

In these videos, performers are sharing their specialized training and its impact on their body, as well as the impressive feats of which they are capable. Of course, there is an extensive amount of training that goes into being a Cirque du Soleil performer and that training does have an impact on the performer's physicality.

In reference to Goffman, it is possible that there are other body types in the back stage that we are not seeing represented in these 24 performers. These performers not only fit Harrison's definition of physicality, but they also generally fit the conventional standards of beauty. It is possible that the only performers comfortable with sharing themselves online are those that fit the mold of the expectations of the circus artists. These individuals also are adhering to traditional gender presentation, which seems to be the expectation of the audience. The performers are feeding into the audience expectations in their posts, suggesting that they only feel comfortable sharing their gender identity if it is already accepted. One example is that the videos posted by female performers are either wearing a variation of sports bras and leggings

or tank tops, all conventionally accepted outfits for women in society. When an individual steps outside of traditional gender presentation— when Schneider decides to post a video where he is wearing black nail polish— they are met with backlash and critique from the audience. This social sanctioning and policing from the audience members suggests that the audience believes that these performers need to stay within the traditional gender presentation.

Not only is a specific body type expected, the body types that do not fit Harrison's definition are often excluded and even ridiculed. There are no Cirque du Soleil performers that do not fit Harrison's definition posting videos, implying that it may be a conscious decision to only show bodies that are accepted in the circus community. Of course, it is possible that performers that do not fit Harrison's definition are on TikTok, but they do not show up in this data set. In a video showing a compilation of performers in costume, one of the performer's costumes is a type of fat suit. It is obvious that she is meant to be a clown figure, meaning that the expectation of the fat suit is to be both comical and ridiculous. This is made worse by the fact that fatness is extremely stigmatized right now in the United States; this performer's video is capitalizing on that stereotype.

For all of the Cirque du Soleil performers, regardless of gender, there is an expectation of strength. Previous research on the circus arts and Cirque du Soleil supports this idea. Erin Hurley and Isabelle Légar discuss how pushing the boundaries of what the body is capable of is the foundation of Cirque du Soleil. All of the videos in this data set show strong performers that put a substantial amount of work into their training in order to create performances that push their body to the limit of what it is capable of.

Even though the circus is not held to the same expectations of traditional society, there are still gendered expectations of circus performers present. After looking at newsletter ads for

circus performers that span from 2015-16, Martha Harrison explained in her 2019 article that women are expected to “display a particular type of femininity,” and the “demands placed upon female performers are extensive” (Harrison 2019, 26). Often in traditional circus job advertisements, the ad makes “physical demands on [female performers] that they do not on the men”: “well-proportioned, good physique, and ‘longer hair preferred” (27). Even though the 2015-16 ads are meant to be more inclusive and forward-thinking, they are evidence that the circus arts are still sexist.

Despite their insistence that they push against the bounds of the circus arts and are diversifying and redefining the circus, Cirque du Soleil seems to use similar hiring techniques that traditional circuses used. Of course, this data set does not represent the entirety of Cirque du Soleil. Furthermore, women are also given roles in Cirque du Soleil and circus performances that are centered around motherhood. The circus ads in Harrison’s article ask for a female performer who can “[demonstrate] her strength in combination with her gentler qualities” (27). There is a pattern of women being expected to fulfill roles based on her gender identity throughout the circus arts.

While the expectations of body image are very different from their female counterparts, job advertisements for men in the circus industry are littered with requests for the performer to be “strong, physical, charismatic, and well-toned” according to Harrison (27). Men are expected to fulfill an expectation for a strong male physique, while women are expected to fulfill a nurturing role. Obviously, being in top physical shape is not the only expectation of circus artists; there are gender roles and body type expectations as well.

In her 2019 article, Martha Harrison discusses how acrobats/aerialists should “be strong and capable, irrelevant of gender” (26). In this data set of Cirque du Soleil performers, female

performers are ectomorphs and male performers present as mesomorphs. Throughout this data set, the audience seems to expect this differentiation between body types by gender. In videos that align with the audience's expectations—for example, in four different videos—the commenters express note how impressive they think the performers' strength and figure are. For the male performers, the commenters are associating larger muscles and visible abs with strength and for the female performer they are expecting thinness/leanness. It is important to note that many male performers are built more like gymnasts and swimmers rather than bodybuilders. In one of those videos, many of the commenters are viewing the performer's bodies as "goals" or as a superior body type, further suggesting that how the performer's body looks is viewed as a direct representation of their value. In one video that shows a female base and a female flier—a female performer holding another female performer in the air—doing an acrobatic move, commenters are discussing and praising the strength of one of the female performers— "That's impressive Especially the woman on the bottom. She is incredibly strong!"—who fits the definition of Harrison, but also has an ectomorph body type. In another video, a female base/flier duo is demonstrating their strength, but the commenter only acknowledges the way her body looks; "omg your abs are still insane." This focus on the female base's body, rather than the talent and strength, implies that her physicality is very important to her audience's support. The female flier is also demonstrating grace and flexibility along with her strength, implying that this performer is comfortable expressing her gender presentation online. Often, the strength of female performers is ignored unless it is accompanied by grace and flexibility. In a different video, a female trapeze artist is demonstrating her strength flying through the air, but the commenters are only focused on her beauty. Two of the videos are very similar— a female base demonstrating strength and a flier demonstrating strength, flexibility, and grace— with one notable difference:

the base in one video is demonstrating flexibility as well. There was a significant difference in audience reaction between the two videos. In one video, the commenter focuses on the female base's body, while in the other video, the commenters are floored by the incredible strength of both of the performers: "That's impressive! Especially the woman on the bottom. She is incredibly strong!" The difference in audience reaction suggests that strength in female performers must be accompanied by flexibility and grace for them to be successful performers worthy of praise. This idea shows up in a few different videos of female bases with female fliers throughout the data set.

While female performers are expected to be graceful, flexible and strong, male performers are only expected to be strong. There are many videos in this data set that show male creators—"creator" is the word used to describe the person on Tik Tok that is posting the video— performing feats that require impressive strength. In four different videos, the male performers fit the definition of Harrison and are mesomorphs. One video shows a male base with a female flier performing on the street. The commenters are impressed by the work and training of both of the individuals but are particularly impressed with the strength of the male base. One of the commenters commented "Holy smokes! The strength of that man!!! 🤪🤪🤪." There are little to no qualifiers on the commenters' reactions to the strength and power of the male performers. In a video where a male performer is training at home, one commenter goes as far as to say that the strength of the performer makes him not human: "Heu.... c'est pas un humain 🤪." The audience's reaction to this performer's video implies that the audience members are evaluating and assessing their own bodies and skills through the performer's bodies and abilities; they are suggesting that this performer's capabilities are out of their league. The audience members are constructing their own identity by comparing themselves to the performers. In her

article, Abidin offers an explanation that can be applied to this phenomenon; influencers—like the performers in this data set—are not considered celebrities. Influencers are viewed more as common people who are entertaining, but people that the audience can interact with on a more personal level. Due to that perceived intimacy and informality, the audience members feel comfortable enough to evaluate their own identity.

Gendered Apparatuses

While Cirque du Soleil claims to be pushing the boundaries of the traditional circus norms, there is a large division in apparatuses based on gender, which is shown throughout the data. Looking at the idea of gendered apparatuses through the lens of symbolic anthropology offered an explanation. Victor Turner, who published *Forest of Symbols* in 1967, discusses how people give meaning to the world and how said meaning is expressed in cultural symbols. Different symbols can imply different meanings, even if there is no obvious connection between meaning and the symbol. These symbols can also hold different meanings based on the person that is interpreting said symbol. In regard to apparatuses, performers and audience members can have different interpretations of a specific apparatus. For example, one apparatus could be regarded as extremely difficult and impressive from a performer's perspective but may be regarded as a less impressive apparatus to an audience member. In this data set, apparatuses are a symbol of gender based on the division of apparatuses by gender and the audience's reaction. This assignment of gender to apparatuses, which do not have a gender, means that these apparatuses are becoming a symbol of that gender. The apparatus then carries that meaning throughout the video and reflects on the performer as well.

Based on the data, there are more male-only apparatuses than female-only. In five different videos in this data set, there are male performers performing on the Russian Swings.

There are no videos of female performers on the Russian Swings. This is a power-based apparatus, which may be the reason that only male performers are using this apparatus; a possible explanation as to why female performers have not started to perform on the Russian Swings is that it has been a male apparatus for so long that they do not view it as an option. In those five videos, there are male performers diving into a large bowl of water. Diving seems to be a gendered act as well. A possible explanation is that diving is often paired with the Russian Swings, which are only used by male performers in this data set. Another possible explanation is that the only reason diving is a gendered act in Cirque du Soleil, is that one of the only feasible ways to incorporate diving into Cirque shows is the Russian Swing.

Three other male apparatuses shown in this data set are the teeterboard, the Cyr wheel, and Hoops (the hoops used for diving through as a gymnastics act, not a hula hoop or an aerial hoop). All these apparatuses are strength and power based, so it is plausible that they are male-only because male performers, on average, have more muscle mass and power than their female counterparts. Historically in the circus arts, these have been male-only apparatuses, so it is possible that Cirque du Soleil is subconsciously adhering to tradition. In her article about gender stereotypes in circus education programs, Allison Funk discusses how there has been “gender-based differential treatment” that have “long-term repercussions” on the rest of these circus performers’ careers (Funk 2018, 19). Another possibility is that these athletes may have been trained in circus centers/gyms that adhere to traditional gender roles so Cirque du Soleil could just put them on apparatuses they are more skilled. Funk discusses that there are both glaringly obvious and more subtle indications of differential gender expectations in circus schools, including apparatus specific training, which could explain why these professional athletes specialize in specific apparatuses that divide across the gender binary. Also, according to Funk,

more male performers graduate from circus schools than female performers, meaning there are more male performers entering the professional world of the circus arts.

There are fewer female-only apparatuses shown in this data set, but both hand-balancing on handstand canes, and unicycles are shown with only female performers. Handstand canes are normally paired with flexibility acts. Flexibility, historically, has been a large requirement of female circus performers. Throughout this data set, women are much more flexible than their male counterparts. There are one or two videos in this data set of male performers showing off their flexibility, but there are a substantial number of female performers using their flexibility in both training and performance videos, implying that their flexibility is an important part of female performer's training and performances. In this data set, the flexibility of male performers was operational, while the female performer's flexibility was performative. In essence, the male performers had enough flexibility to perform the moves, while the female performer's flexibility was used to draw audience attention. While there was one male performer that had a video displaying flexibility in middle splits, there were over twenty videos where female performers were displaying flexibility.

In the few instances when Cirque du Soleil steps outside of the traditional gender divide of apparatuses, there is pushback from the audience. Gymnastic rings have historically been a male apparatus—as it originated in men's gymnastics—but in this data set there was a woman who was training on the gymnastics rings with her male performer counterparts. However, the other instances where gymnastics rings were shown in the data set were during performances with only male performers. Not only were women not shown on the gymnastic rings during performances, Tik Tok flagged the training video as unsafe, and the commenters were critical of her inclusion: “purple butchered the landing.” For context, the female performer was the only

one wearing purple and was the only woman in the group of performers. Outside of her failed landing, the female performer was objectively and technically as clean in her performance as the other male performers she was training with. On the edge of the video, one can see that one of the other male performers had a failed landing, just like the female performer. The other two performers had a successful landing. The commenters did not mention the male performer's landing, only commenting on the female performer's landing. This audience pushback could highlight the idea that the audience is upset when women encroach on male apparatuses.

A possible explanation for the fact that women do not generally perform on the gymnastics rings is that female performers do not come from circus centers and gyms that train them on gymnastic rings. This connects back to Allison Funk's research into how gendered training can be at circus centers, where many professional circus performers are trained. It is conspicuous that Tik Tok flagged this video when compared to other videos they have not flagged that are objectively far more dangerous. It is possible that the inclusion of a female performer and the subsequent critique in the comments led Tik Tok to flag this video. TikTok has monitors who look at videos and comment sections to determine whether a video is safe to post or not. If it is deemed unsafe, they will either remove the video or flag the video with a warning about not attempting the actions at home.

Even though pole and aerial pole are stereotyped as being a female-only apparatus due to its association with stripping, throughout the entire data set, only a male performer was seen performing on the aerial pole. On Saulo Sarmiento's videos of performing and training aerial pole there is a mixed review from the commenters. In the video, he is performing on a pole at his friend's wedding as a gift. Some commenters are supportive of his confident and strong videos, but others include gendered critiques and a lack of support. The lack of support likely stems from

the commenter's idea that male performers should not perform on aerial pole due to its connection to stripping. An example of this lack of support is a commenter who believes aerial pole is inherently sexual: "what I always wanted on my wedding day...my friend to strip for me 😂😂😂." Not only does this comment suggest that Sarmiento is stripping for his friends on their wedding day instead of performing on an apparatus, but the commenter is ridiculing his profession and sexualizing him at the same time. Sarmiento doesn't receive criticism on any of his videos that do not include the aerial pole, suggesting that there is a connection between criticism and the type of apparatus, especially when it is stereotyped as being for the opposite gender. The videos that show strong male performers on apparatuses that are typically used by female performers are the exception to audience support. On a few different videos of a male performer who is on an aerial pole, many of the male commenters lashed out and were negative in their responses to the video. Some commenters mentioned how similar the aerial pole was to the poles used by strippers and made negative sexualizing comments towards the creator. Aerial pole for example has always been a symbol of pole dancing, so it is often interpreted as a less serious, sex-filled apparatus and it lessens the capabilities of the performer in the eyes of the audience. These audience members imply that the aerial pole is female, and assign all the attributes associated with that gender. These commenters' messages support Michael Johnson's ideas that men are equally likely to receive criticism for their bodies (2012). That negativity suggests that some of the commenters do not appreciate male strength if it is feminized in any way. The comments suggest that once femininity is introduced, it pollutes anything it is involved with, even just symbolically. This symbolic pollution of male strength by femininity implies that masculinity can be canceled out by femininity in the eyes of the audience.

Gender Roles and Presentation

While there are expectations of performers in Cirque du Soleil based on traditional gender roles/presentation, there are instances where Cirque du Soleil pushes the boundaries of said expectations. In this data set, there are a few videos that focus on performances, meaning that the performers are in costumes chosen by Cirque du Soleil for a specific show. While some of the performers are in costumes that fit into traditional gender roles—a female performer wearing a dress or a male performer wearing pants and no shirt, for example— there are some costumes that are androgynous. In his article, Michael Johnson discusses how Cirque du Soleil shows and costume design are “[challenging] prevailing ideas about gender and androgyny in particular” (Johnson 2012, 1). The way Johnson discusses how Cirque du Soleil is approaching androgyny in their performances is nearly identical to how these TikTok creators are presenting androgyny in their costumes: “circus men and women often [looking] indistinguishable from each other, particularly as they exhibited equally difficult feats of agility” (2). Both Cirque du Soleil and Cirque du Soleil performers on TikTok are challenging prevailing stereotypes about gender and androgyny in the videos that include a live performance. However, throughout these videos, none of the androgynous characters have leading roles; the larger roles with character arcs are generally saved for gender-specific roles. It should be noted that the expectation is that the norms of Cirque du Soleil would be shown in these videos as the performer has control over whether to post a particular performance on social media.

Makeup

In all of the videos in this data set that are centered around a live performance, both male and female performers are wearing makeup as part of their costumes. Of those 45 videos, there are a few instances where the performer is giving the audience a sneak peek into how they apply their makeup for the show. Even though all of the performers who are giving a sneak peek into

their makeup routine are men, all of the female performers are wearing makeup when they perform as well. This is a clear example of performer presentation on Tik Tok; the male performers are choosing to share their makeup routine, while the female performers are choosing not to. These choices tie directly into how these performers are curating their image on Tik Tok; it is commonplace in society for women to wear makeup, but the same cannot be said about men. A possible reason that male performers are choosing to share their makeup routine is to differentiate themselves from other male athletes and performers; they wear makeup as a part of their profession. Makeup is a part of the identity of a male circus performer. Another possible explanation is that these male performers are aware of the stereotypes within gender presentation and are attempting to push the boundaries on what is considered right or common in regard to makeup. One performer from Canada, Thomas Hubener, shared his makeup routine with his fan base before one of his performances. The bio of his video explained that this routine was just “a day in the life,” so one can interpret that his makeup is just another aspect of his job. Another performer, Ryan Schneider shared a similar video that included his makeup look for a performance. The audience response on both Hubener and Schneider’s videos were positive with comments like “Love your makeup” and “Love!!!” Another Cirque du Soleil performer, Vincent Lavoie, shared an everyday makeup routine that showed a behind the scenes look into his pre-performance routine. Unfortunately, even though his video was very similar to Hubener’s, Lavoie received a very different audience response. The responses were littered with stereotypes such as “I’m literally watching rupauls drag race right now.” These responses highlight the pushback male performers can receive when wearing makeup, even if it is a requirement for their job. This pushback can stem from audience expectation of traditional gender presentation; the

way that these male performers are choosing to present their masculinity does not match up with some of the audiences' definition of masculinity.

Gender and Sexualization

While there are more instances of female performers being sexualized, male performers are often sexualized as well. In Lavoie's videos, some of the audience members comment on his sexuality in a negative way when he posts videos about his makeup routine. Another prominent male creator is Saulo Sarmiento, whose videos focus on his work with the aerial pole. Even though very few of his videos are sexualized, the audience reaction includes sexist remarks and comparing his work to stripping, due to the pole's connection to the stripping industry. While Saulo Sarmiento is not exhibiting any behavior that is inconsistent with other male creators, he is sexualized due to his apparatus' connection to the stripping industry. In one video about a creator who posted videos about diving off a Russian Swing, he mentions that the video was previously removed by TikTok for adult nudity. Instead of sexualizing the creator in any way, the audience was very defensive of the male creator, saying things like "it's bathing suits. they have clothes on." This defensiveness on behalf of the male creator by the audience suggests that some of the audience members are trying to draw the attention away from the sexualizing comments and instead refocus back onto the skill involved in the act. It is important to note that this is one of the only instances where the audience was this defensive of a creator. One performer, Harvey Donnelly, does tend to post videos that have an underlying sexualization. In nearly all of his videos, he is either practicing or performing shirtless. For some apparatuses, being shirtless is necessary from a safety perspective because there is less fabric to get caught on aerial apparatuses. On a Cyr Wheel, if the shirt was loose, it could hinder his sight or get caught in the wheel. That being said, it is not completely necessary for him to be shirtless in all of the Cyr

Wheel videos. He could just be more comfortable practicing shirtless or may want to show off his hard work or even appeal to his largely female fan base. In one of his videos, Donnelly is performing on aerial chains in a sexy routine—the leather, red lights and sensual music suggest he is performing a routine meant to be interpreted as sexy—which is well received by some of the commenters. One commenter went so far as to say, “I mean I had different chains in mind.” As the male performer seemed to be comfortable with being sexualized on his page— Donnelly continuously posts similar videos that invoke sensual responses and continues to interact with his commenters—the audience seemed comfortable offering flirty messages.

Often, female performers are sexualized more than male performers. In the data set, it was a rarity for male performers to be sexualized in their videos, especially in comparison to the female performers’ videos, where female creators are often sexualized during their performance videos or regular training videos. In comparison to the comments on male creator’s videos, the comments on female creator’s videos are more graphic and more frequent. On one of Schneider’s videos where he is performing acrobatics with his wife, there are some sexist comments. One male commenter asks, “How does her uterus not fall out???” when she performed a move that required abnormal amounts of hip flexibility. This comment is reducing the performer to her reproductive organs, which is objectifying and sexist. Not only is this comment misogynistic, it is sexualizing because the commenter is implying that the work she is doing is too strenuous for her female body, but is drawing attention to her sexual characteristics. Of course, there is a difference between sexualization of a woman in a reproductive way and a sexually desirable way. That being said, the outcome is similar: the woman is reduced down to what the commenter is noticing.

Another example of sexualization against female creators is on a video that showed two female performers performing acrobatics. Interestingly, there are not just sexualizing comments on this video, but there are some comments that express excessive familiarity with the creator. One commenter said, “awesome baby girls' love you” and another commented, “Are used to be young and I would have interest you. But I don't know what's going.” According to Crystal Abidin in her 2015 article, this excessive familiarity is not a phenomenon that is unique to TikTok. Abidin explains that there is “a perceived intimacy between influencer and follower,” which is an attempt to “bridge the distance” between the creator and the fan (Abidin 2015). That perceived intimacy could give the audience the impression that an exclusive or intimate exchange would be welcome on that creator's video.

Flier/Base Pairs

For duos, the traditional circus partnership is between a female flier and a male base. In his article, Michael Johnson compares Cirque du Soleil with the traditional circus in relation to gender roles. Johnson discusses how there is a strong connection between societal expectations and how muscular physicality is equated with masculinity or lack thereof (2012).

In this data set, there is a mix between traditional flier/base pairs and non-traditional flier/base pairs. There are around fifteen traditional flier/base pairs for both acrobatics and flying trapeze in this data set. A possible explanation that the flier/base pair is still popular is that women are, on average, smaller than their male counterparts, making them easier to toss through the air. While there are male flier/male base and female flier/female base pairs, there are no male flier/female base pairs in any of the videos, training, performances, or street performances. In his article, Johnson discusses how many acrobats and performers were gymnasts or conservatory-trained artists before joining Cirque du Soleil instead of the generational training many traditional circus

artists received (2012). This is a likely explanation for why these contemporary artists can perform larger feats with different flier/base pairs; the strength gap between male and female artists perhaps has lessened. Cirque du Soleil is challenging the traditional gender roles in circus by including single gender base/flier duos, which was not seen in the traditional circus.

In one of the female performer's videos, there is a sexist undertone. Kate, one of the female trapeze artists, posted a video of her male base 'sacrificing' himself for her, the female flier. As Kate herself is the one who used the word 'sacrifice' in relation to her male base keeping her from falling into the net, there is an implication that he was putting her needs and safety ahead of his own. By using the word 'sacrifice,' Kate removes the responsibility from her male base and implies that he was being chivalrous, instead of taking partial responsibility for the failed move. As a male base, he is responsible for keeping both his flier and himself safe. Also, the word 'sacrifice' implies that Kate is putting herself in a state of helplessness, rather than acknowledging her position as flier, which gives her half of the responsibility of executing the skill correctly.

There is a mixed reaction to the flier/base pair videos from the audience. The commenters are a little sexist in their support of the male base and are overall very impressed by his actions, commenting "Men who naturally protect have my heart 😊." Commenters continue being impressed by the training and dedication it takes to produce great feats/tricks, but often express confusion and concern for the safety of the fliers. For example, in Ryan Schneider's video, one commenter expressed concern about how the base will have back issues later on in life.

PRIDE

Cirque du Soleil as a company is proud of its performers and the crew. In their own company Tik Tok account, they post videos that show behind the scenes of performances,

training, and the corporate side of the company. Most of their videos focus on the accomplishments and hard work of the performers and showcase their talents. In two videos in particular, Cirque du Soleil takes the time to post appreciative videos of their performers and crew. In one of the videos, Cirque du Soleil was being supportive of the background members of their crew who work hard to create a great show. This video received 662k likes, suggesting widespread appreciation from fans. It is important to note that there are no videos of performers directly discussing the hard work the crews put into shows and into their safety. Even though safety is a shared responsibility between the crew and the performers, the performers are not discussing the crew's role in training and performances. The performers are focused on image production for themselves and their fellow performers in the front stage, to use Goffman's terminology. There is no mention of the crew's involvement in the back stage aspect of training and performances, which is vital for a circus performance. It is possible that the performers are trying to save face and allow the audience to perceive that the performers are fully responsible for their own safety during the performances and training. A possible explanation for the lack of discussion surrounding the crew members and their hard work is that the crew members are directly connected to the safety protocols, which are also not really discussed in this data set. The general lack of information about the safety protocols and the seemingly dangerous feats that the performers are executing is what likely makes the commenters so curious about what is going on behind the scenes; the curiosity is creating more engagement with the videos, meaning more people are likely to see the performer's videos in the future.

Like Cirque du Soleil, performers are very proud of their fellow performers. In this set of videos, there are twenty-four instances of teammates filming one another during training and taking the time to brag about their coworkers. There is support for one another present in this

data set. There is also clapping and cheering when other performers are succeeding and there were many videos in this data set of performers clapping for one another during training. One of the videos shows a male performer clapping for a fellow teammate. Another video shows a male performer filming a female performer flying and being vocal about how impressed he was by her hard work and training. Another video shows a female creator being supportive of an all-male stunt team working hard during training. In another video of a female performer being impressed by her male counterparts, the caption of the video is “this guy.” There is a pattern of Cirque du Soleil performers on Tik Tok being proud of their fellow performers and teammates, which suggests a friendship and level of care that exceeds simply being traditional coworkers. Within these videos that include performers expressing pride in their teammates, there is no qualifier attached to the pride or attempt to draw attention to themselves; these performers are just acknowledging the hard work of their fellow performers. That being said, in a video of Ryan Schneider, he expresses pride for his flier and himself for performing and landing one of the rarest tricks in flying trapeze: “one of the hardest & rarely performed tricks in trapeze... and we schnagged it 😊.” Throughout his videos, Schneider is rarely boastful, but this is an example of an artist being at the forefront of his field and acknowledging how proud he is of that fact.

There are a few videos in this data set of performers being overly boastful. Some of the performers are very vocal about the pride in their hard work and dedication to their training and performances. One performer, Thomas Hubener, posted a few videos of his training sessions. One of his videos had a video caption stating, “Your workout is my warmup,” which is a boastful way of being proud of his accomplishments and training. Another one of his videos had a caption that asked “Chance ou talent? [luck or talent?]” His cheeky questions and comments are evidence of how proud he was of his work. Just as the audience members were processing

their identity through comparing themselves to the performer, the performer is comparing himself to the audience to construct a sense of identity. Hubener, the performer, is making an assumption on the skill of the audience members to prop himself and construct a sense of self. Bauman's idea of differential identity, which he discusses in his 1971 article "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore," is useful here. He discusses how individuals or groups can define themselves in contrast with another group of people. By describing themselves in contrast with another group of people, they are creating a sense of identity. Here, Hubener and the audience are describing themselves in contrast to one another in order to define their sense of self.

While many commenters are supportive and impressed by the hard work of the performers, the videos where performers are overly prideful and acting like prima donnas have few likes and are not often well received by the audience. On the video of one male performer, Andrei Pawluk, his caption states "Nice and Easy" in relation to the performance in his video, implying that the move that he was doing, which was objectively difficult to execute, was nice and easy for him. While the commenters are impressed, they are not overly engaged. In this data set, videos like this one where performers are a bit cockier are not as well received. In one of Harvey Donnelly's videos, where he is being a bit cocky, commenters are equally as cheeky in their comments: "HE LOOKS LIKE A KID ON A SWING HAHHAHAHA" and "not everyone finding this attractive, I burst out laughing 😂." Commenters seem to match the performer's tone; if performers are overly proud, those videos have cheeky and even critical comments in the comment section. If performers are a bit humbler, the video has more supportive comments.

TRUST

There is trust that exists between the performers, their teammates, and their spotters, but it is not something shown implicitly rather than commented on explicitly. In numerous videos the performers are not talking about how much trust is needed between partners and teammates. In one video, the flier is scared to attempt a new move. She trusts her base to catch her—implied by the fact she attempted the move at all— but doesn't mention the trust required between flier and base when attempting new moves. A flier would not be willing to attempt a difficult or riskier move with a base they did not trust. There are four other videos in this data set that are similar to this one. In another video, a male performer attempts a move, but misses the edge of the trampoline. One of his teammates rushed to make sure he didn't fall off the edge of the trampoline. Due to the speed at which the other performer came to his rescue, the other performer may have been a spotter in this video. While his role was never explicitly stated, he was at the edge of the trampoline watching his fellow teammate and rushed to his aide when necessary. While this may be an example of care and concern, it is also an indication that the performer trusted his fellow performers to help him.

There were only a few instances where performers talked about the trust that exists between performers. One example is of a female flier being very supportive and appreciative of her male bases. In the bio of her video, she says that these are “the only guys I fully trust.” The commenters are impressed by her declaration but are nervous about how dangerous her apparatus could be. The female flier suggests that she does not trust her coworkers equally; trust is a continuum and not all or nothing within this field. She is suggesting that the male bases she is working with are the only male bases she is willing to perform risky feats with. One possible explanation is that she has trained with these performers for long enough that she is unwilling to

work with other bases. Another possible explanation is that she does not believe that other bases in the company will do as good of a job looking out for her and her safety.

While the performers do not often explicitly mention how much trust is needed between performers—especially flier/base pairs—the commenters do take notice in the videos of the data set. One commenter mentions that even though they were an elite gymnast, they would not have as much trust for their teammates; “I was an elite gymnast but this is a whole new level. I would have broke a ton of bones. Eek. pretty sure I don't know anyone I'd trust that much.” The shock that the commenters express when they see the trust between performers means that the audience is recognizing the trust between performers, even if it is not often explicitly mentioned by the performers in their videos.

SAFETY AND RISK

Safety is ingrained in Cirque du Soleil culture but is not often mentioned unless prompted by commenters. Shrier’s 2009 article discusses the injury rate of professional circus artists, specifically the circus artists of Cirque du Soleil. According to Shrier, most of the injuries sustained by Cirque artists require relatively few treatments. Even though the Cirque du Soleil shows include highly acrobatic and athletic maneuvers, the injury rates are within ranges of other professional athletics, such as NCAA women’s gymnastics and NCAA men’s basketball. Shrier touches on the idea that professional circus artists have similar injuries across gender lines, bringing about equality in the circus arts.

In this data set, there are very few videos that talk about the safety process and how the performers use equipment and harnesses to keep themselves safe during training and performances. That being said, a substantial number of the videos in this data set show how important safety is to these performers, even without a large emphasis on the process. For

example, in five different videos, spotters come in and out of the frame of the video. Even though it was obvious that they were not the focal point of the video, they were essential to the training process and are a by-product of the work these performers do. In one of these videos that discusses the safety process, the flier is saved by his spotter and was clearly grateful: Ryan Schneider's caption on this video was "Glad my buddy saved me at the end!" Schneider's expression of gratitude is a great representation of the relationship and reliance that exists between spotter and flier.

In a video that does not discuss the safety process, the spotter's importance is still equally as clear in the video; the man in the harness relies on his spotter during his training, as the harness indicates that he is not confident in landing the trick safely untethered. Another video where the female creator was discussing the safety aspect of their training on the trapeze Kate talks about how she uses safety lines to try new tricks safely before she feels confident enough to try the moves without the safety lines. By posting this video, the female creator is lifting the curtain on some of the safety protocols and procedures of Cirque du Soleil and removing some of the mystery behind their training, which has been part of the circus' history for a long time.

The lack of explicit attention or emphasis on the safety protocols the performers and Cirque du Soleil take evoke curiosity and concern in the comments. In the video where the male spotter is in the background of the video and the male flier in a harness, one commenter asked "Is that a harness to keep you safe? That is really impressive." While, of course, the commenter is worried and confused, they are also very supportive of the performer. In a teeterboard¹ training video, the creator is filming his teammates as they train using safety lines. The video does not mention the importance of the safety lines or how they work or even any of the other safety

¹ This is an acrobatic apparatus that resembles a see-saw on a child's playground. It is made out of wood (oak) and has a steel fulcrum that divides the planks. It is used to create power in jumps to allow performers to flip in their air.

precautions taken during training, which evokes worry and curiosity in the comment section. One commenter asked, “Is there material on the swing to prevent you guys from slipping?” The general lack of information about the safety protocols and the seemingly dangerous feats that the performers are executing is what likely makes the commenters so curious about what is going on behind the scenes. The commenters are not taking into account all the safety precautions that are taken by Cirque du Soleil and the performers because that information is not readily accessible. Furthermore, the audience is conditioned to enjoy the danger as much as the talent, when watching a Cirque du Soleil performance. In her 2014 article, Amy Meyer discusses this phenomenon. Meyer discusses how the risk present in performance creates “a shared sensory experience between the performer and the audience,” which makes the performance more enthralling (Meyer 2014, 12). While risk does not always indicate danger, it can often look that way from the audience, especially if the audience is not aware of the safety protocols taken by the performers.

It is also possible that the performers are aware of the perception of the audience and are playing into the audience’s expectations of risk in order to increase viewership.

In a 2021 study, “Trick and Please. A Mixed-Method Study On User Assumptions About the TikTok Algorithm,” Evans, Kauffman, Klug and Qin look at what impacts the TikTok Algorithm. Their study confirms that the more likes and engagement on a video, there is a higher likelihood that the algorithm will place the video in front of more viewers. That confirmation implies that the audience members would have direct influence on whether or not a performer’s video does well, something the performers are likely very aware of. That awareness likely influences how the performers react to audience engagement; if a particular trend or type of video does really well, the performer would continue to post similar videos. Therefore, it is very

possible that the performers are continuing to post videos that include risky and dangerous-looking acts in order to increase audience engagement to lead to more viewership.

A large problem arises if an audience member does not understand the safety protocols required, but still attempts to perform these feats on their own. Chretien and Greysen's 2010 article discuss the difficulty in maintaining a professional boundary on social media, especially regarding safety. One of the largest issues of having professionals on social media is that one poorly thought-out post can negatively impact the entire profession. Professionalism does not just encompass avoiding negative behavior on screen, it involves maintaining professionalism and professional boundaries on social media as well. Of course, while this source focuses on medical professionals, this article pertains to other professionals as well. Professionals need to be very careful what they post on social media, as viewers are not professionals themselves and may take the professional's post at face value without doing their own research or consulting a professional in real life. They need to think about the potential impact of their presence online before posting. This relates to Cirque du Soleil performers as these performers do not know who their audience truly is. Just as you cannot take medical advice on social media without consulting another doctor face to face, one cannot perform daring circus acts without supervision of a coach. Both are very dangerous to the person watching. If the performer posts a 'cool' looking trick that an audience member wants to try at home, even if said audience member does not have the proper training, the audience member could be seriously injured. While the performer would not be at fault, they are perpetuating this problem by posting a video of the trick in the first place. Adding a warning or a note about how this could be dangerous without supervision and proper training could go a long way.

Another video is of a female performer filming her husband and his brother on straps as a duo. Some of the commenters were supportive, but many others were worried about the safety of the duo as they did not have tethers on as they were training. One of the commenters said, “I don’t see a harness,” which could even be seen as a rebuke against the performers. It is also an implication that the audience likely has a basic knowledge of some of the safety protocols that are necessary for the performers. It could also indicate that the commenters are trying to show off their knowledge, whether or not that knowledge is accurate. The commenter is implying that they are not taking the proper precautions to be safe during training and performances. In another video where a woman fell on the spring floor while training, a commenter asked, “Her back okay?” The creator responded back to this commenter and said, “Lol yea, that’s why we train on the spring floor.” Even though the creator’s response is a little cheeky, the defense and possible offense in the tone of his response indicates that he is surprised that they didn’t pick up on the safety precautions that they were taking, as well as annoyed at the implication that he would put his partner in danger by not considering the safety of his partner (and wife). A possible explanation is located in Ryan Milner’s “The World Made Meme.” Published in 2016, Milner discusses a phenomenon called Poe’s Law, which explains that one cannot tell for certain whether something on the internet was meant to be taken seriously or as a joke. As ‘LOL’ is shorthand for ‘laugh out loud,’ one interpretation of the creator’s response could be face value: the creator thought the commenter’s response was funny and then offered a serious explanation. In social media culture, lol has been transformed to mean something entirely different. An LOL can be added at the beginning or end of a phrase to soften a response or retort, which would change the meaning of the creator’s response entirely; the creator may have intended for his comment to be read snidely, but wanted to soften the response to not offend the commenter and

thus included an ‘lol.’ Unfortunately, there is no simple explanation as the creator did not explain in detail which, if any, of the interpretations above are correct.

The reason that safety is so important to performers is due to the risk involved in their training. In a few of the videos, the fliers fall during their training. In one video in particular, Ryan Schneider’s flier fell multiple times during his training. In another one of his videos, his flier kicked him in the head during his training. A possible explanation as to why Schneider is willing to share this risk is to show the hard work they put into their training. Another possible explanation is that the performers are aware that a combination of a humble persona and a video about an accident in training will result in a popular video; it’s possible that the performers recognize the power of *schadenfreude*. If they wanted to only show off their skill, the performers would not include videos of failure. These videos represent the hard work and dedication that Schneider puts into his training, as well as the strength required to perform some of these moves. Due to the importance placed on strength and power of male performers, some of the male flier/base pairs are able to produce larger and riskier tricks, something that is present in this data set. In Ryan Schneider’s videos, he discusses how they are performing some of the hardest trapeze tricks in the world. He also shows some of the injuries and missteps that take place during training. In one video, he showed off his severe trapeze injury—a blow to the forehead—that came from a trapeze move going wrong during practice.

While there is danger and risk involved in a circus performance, some of the risk is perspective-based. The spectators of these shows are “[condoning] situations of manufactured danger” from the comfort of the auditorium with no sense of personal danger (Meyer 2014, 17). Meyer argues that, from the performers point of view, they “choose their profession and the risk that comes with it, rather than experiencing inescapable risk that is outside of their control” (13).

While spectators view the feats as dangerous and impressive, circus performers are doing a job, which creates a large difference in perspective. The risk-taking aspect of the circus makes up a large part of the identity of both the individual performers, as well as the community as a whole; risk and safety precautions are a large part of the circus arts.

While safety is one of the most important aspects of the circus arts, rigging is not nationally regulated, which raises some concerns, which is something Hane and Stitch discuss in their 2020 article. Cirque du Soleil is particularly careful with rigging, which means that “most of the injuries incurred by Cirque artists require relatively few treatments and result in few missed or altered performances,”(Shrier 2009, 1146). Stitch and Hane argue that performers must be aware of their bodies and their current ability to stay safe during training: “Another strategy for developing responsibility in higher risk genres is acknowledging one’s current abilities and needs, which can vary from day to day” (Stitch and Hane 2020, 3). In his 2017 article, Kevin Shaw explains that even when performers take every precaution possible, the circus arts take a toll on the body: “I, like other aerialists, measured my progress through transformative indicators—callouses, burns, and bruises, as well as more serious injuries and the gradual processes of embodied expertise” (Shaw 2017, 11). As these transformative indicators are a source of pride, they make up a part of community and individual identity construction.

There is one video in this data set that focuses on one of the worst-case scenarios: the rig broke while the performers were training. While, luckily, all the performers were alright, it does highlight the danger that is present during both training and performances. It also could suggest that the performers are aware that the risk and shock of this video would have substantial views and audience interaction, which again suggests a performer's awareness of *schadenfreude*.

One of the aspects of risk that is not being discussed by the circus community as a whole is the long-term impact of such specialized and intense training. During one of the acrobatic training videos where a base had two people standing on top of his shoulders, a commenter wrote, “That hurt my back 😬 Dude on bottom will have back issues.” While the performers do not discuss this aspect of the profession, the commenters are commenting on the possible long-term effects of the job. Another risk that is not being discussed is the risk of death. While it is an extremely rare occurrence in Cirque du Soleil, it has happened in the history of their performances. The lack of discussion surrounding this dark aspect of the circus arts is telling; its absence may be connected to the image that Cirque du Soleil expects of their performers. The performers may be hesitant to discuss this aspect of the circus arts because it would present their chosen profession in a bad light; Unless the audience comments about this topic, it is unlikely that the performers would bring it up themselves.

While these Cirque du Soleil performers are individuals sharing pieces of their life online, they are also professionals. The audience members on TikTok are potential audience members in person as well, meaning the performers are potentially relying on the audience for their livelihood. Therefore, a producer/consumer relationship exists between the performers and the audience members.

The audience can police the performer’s videos through social sanctioning; if an audience member does not approve of a topic, they can comment negatively or choose not to engage with the video at all. An example of social sanctioning in this data set has previously been mentioned; when a female performer was training on the gymnastic rings, there were negative comments directed towards her. The audience members expressed their displeasure with a female performer training on a traditionally male apparatus. Relating back to the 2021 study done by Evans,

Kauffman, Klug, and Qin, the audience members are likely also aware of the impact of their engagement with the performer's videos. That awareness can lead the audience to be selective in the support of the performers; if the audience members do not like a particular topic—safety, for example— they can choose not to like or engage with the post in any way, which would decrease the viewership and popularity of their video. Therefore, the audience can influence what the performer decides to post, especially if the performer cares a lot about video engagement.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this data set, Cirque du Soleil performers constructed a shared community while also sharing their personal identities over social media. By looking at both the videos and the comment sections, it was obvious to discern that these performers are processing their sense of identity through their interactions with the audience members. Similarly, the audience members are processing their sense of identity in contrast with the Cirque du Soleil performers.

While, of course, this data set does not represent all of Cirque du Soleil, it does allow a small glimpse into the shared values of the community. Cirque du Soleil pushes the boundary of traditional gender roles and presentation, but when the performers try to do the same, they are mildly censored. The values that are the most visible are safety and trust. While that is not explicitly talked about in many of the videos, they are embedded throughout the entire data set, which implies that these are integral parts of the identity of these Cirque du Soleil performers. Another value that is expressed is pushing the boundaries of the traditional circus; many different performers expressed pride at mastering new tricks and changing the history of the circus arts. The expression of pride framed in a humble way is a large part of the identity of circus performers as it allows these performers to show their progress and hard work.

While there are values shared between Cirque du Soleil performers, there is not a large amount of interaction between performers. There is a much more substantial conversation occurring between performers and audience members through the comment section of the videos.

This project explored the connection between social media and community and personal identities of Cirque du Soleil performers, which expanded upon previous research in the circus arts. The previous research focused on areas such as gender inequities in the circus arts, gender presentation, and how risk was viewed by both the audience and performers. Previous research did not evaluate the constructed shared community of performers on Tik Tok. While this data set offered many insights into the community of Cirque du Soleil performers on Tik Tok, there are still so many different avenues to explore. One example is there were a few references to the queer community in this data set, but not enough for a claim to emerge. Another potential avenue for exploration is how the commenters' comments are connected to their gender identity.

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