5-2024

A Photo-Elicitation of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Costume Tradition and an Exploration of the Impact this Tradition has on the Identity of Participants

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Abstract

Mardi Gras organizations, known as *krewes*, organize yearly *tableaus* to present their maids, queens, and debutantes in lavish costumes (Dessens, 2018). For two centuries, the city of New Orleans was the stage for a rich Mardi Gras tradition, (Madden, 1874), however, the existing body of literature failed to establish a consensus on the meanings of the *tableau*. To explore this tradition, interviews were conducted with women who participated in New Orleans Mardi Gras as debutantes, maids, queens, and costume designers (Bates et al., 2017). After transcribing the interviews, the researcher communicated patterns in data through a thematic analysis. (Braun, 2006). As a result, the research highlighted findings regarding the Mardi Gras dressmaking tradition, its variations across different krewes, and its influence on the social identity of maids.

Beyond the external transformation, the Mardi Gras costuming experience resonated deeply with participants. For many of the women, the Mardi Gras tradition served as a pivotal moment, boosting their confidence, helping them adopt new roles, and strengthening their ties to their heritage and community. Additionally, many of the women expressed that these costumes, coupled with traditional Mardi Gras practices, transformed their identity. These traditions also provided a framework for understanding their place within a community and contributed to a sense of belonging across generations.

The limited racial diversity within the study group, five Caucasian women and one African-American woman is an aspect to consider due to its implications on the generalizability of the data collected. Moving forward, recognizing costume's role in cultural engagement can inform efforts to empower young women to express their identities, preserve traditions, and navigate identity formation.

Introduction

1.1 Background and Need

The Mardi Gras season begins in January and ends roughly two months later on Mardi Gras Day or Fat Tuesday. During this time, the city of New Orleans is electric--parades fill the streets with gaudy floats, bringing all ages, genders, and races into celebration. In this vibrant city filled with rich tradition and contradiction; class and racial divides blur during this season of fun (Leathlem, 1994). For some, Mardi Gras acts as a diversion from society; a time when locals and tourists can mask or unmask their identity. For others, Mardi Gras is simply a time to "*Laissez les bons temps roule*r" or "Let the good times roll".

While these parades are open to everyone, not all aspects of Mardi Gras are shared equally. Away from the parades, behind the closed doors of society, a more grandiose reality exists. Exclusive Carnival organizations called *krewes* host elaborate balls during the Mardi Gras season. Members participate with pride in this deep-rooted tradition and invest both time and money in their krewe (Leathlem, 1994) Krewe membership is often invite-only, and the process of becoming a member of these exclusive krewes can cost thousands of dollars. To attend a ball, a ticket and *costume de rigueur*, or black tie, is required. During the *tableau,* a formal presentation preceding the ball, the royal court of the king, queen, dukes, and maids present themselves to the crowd. At these *tableaus*, krewes present their members in lavish gowns and costumes topped with headpieces, embellished with Swarovski crystals, hoop skirts, layers of tulle, and bright colors (Gillett, 2006). These *tableaus* reinforce notions of generational wealth and social hierarchy, in stark contrast to the inclusive and festive spirit of the parades. For a holiday created as a distraction from society and a celebration of uniqueness, this tradition reflects tensions in social power, gender, and identity (Dessens, 2018).

Particularly, symbolic of this tension are the costumes of maids. Maids are young women typically between the ages of 17 and 20. The ball and *tableau* function as their presentation to society. For the occasion, maids wear costumes that are often prepared a year in advance. Unlike other "coming of age" ceremonies, the maids' costumes focus on tradition and disregard trends. During the *tableau*, women display themselves as images of Southern beauty and femininity, assuming an aristocratic persona (Dessens, 2018).

In other cultures, costume and identity have been directly correlated with influence on identity development through communicating class, status, age, and wealth (Elizabeth, 2022; Kuper, 1973). Personal identity, the perception of self, is internally shaped by life experiences. These personal identities can evolve with new experiences and merge with social identity through continual interaction with others. Within Mardi Gras participants, social identity is formed through involvement in social groups, exemplified by membership in a krewe. Cultural identity is the least changeable of the three. Based on socially constructed categories at birth, historical origins are the foundation of cultural identity development. Additionally, cultural identity teaches individuals social expectations and values (Ahrndt, 2015).

For two centuries, the city of New Orleans has produced hundreds of women who participate in Mardi Gras tradition as a maid, debutante, or queen. Until this point, there has been little to no exploration of how traditional dress influences these young women's perception of self. This project explores the effect of Mardi Gras costumes on young females' sense of personal self, which involves "an assessment of the self by the self," and social self, which involves "evaluations concerning other people" (Sneath, 2008, p. 173).

Appendix A

Definitions of Common Terms

1. **Ball**… *noun* **1**: an after-party to the formal *tableau* presentation … *noun* **2:** informally used as a way to describe the *tableau* tradition
2. **Cajun** /ˈkeɪdʒ(ə)n/…*noun* **1***:* a member of a community in the bayou regions of Southern Louisiana, typically descendants of French Canadians…. *adjective* **2:** used to describe a type of cuisine strongly associated with the rural, bayou region of Southern Louisiana **3:** to describe a specific style of music (i.e. Cajun Zydeco)
3. **Captain**… *noun* **1**: a volunteer member of the krewe that is appointed by the krewe's board **2**: the leader of the krewe that stays the same year after year **3**: responsible for the organization and planning within the krewe
4. **Creole**…*noun* **1***:* meaning anything from an ethnic group consisting of individuals with European and African, Caribbean, or Hispanic descent to individuals born in New Orleans with French or Spanish ancestry …. *adjective* **2:** used to describe a type of cuisine strongly associated with New Orleans **3:** to describe specific foods (i.e., Creole tomatoes)
5. **Debutantes** *noun* **1:** a female member of a royal court chosen based on their father's provenance within the krewe **2:** a debutante who is "presented" to society through the *tableau* ritual who typically wears a white gown
6. **Duke**… *noun* **1:** another member of the krewe's royal court that serves as an escort to court maids
7. **Float**…. *noun* **1:** large, hand-painted paper-mache moving sculptures

8. **King**... *noun* **1***:* another member of the krewe's royal court who is chosen because he is an influential member of the krewe
9. **Krewe** /kruː/…. *noun* **1:** a social club in New Orleans **2:** a group of people that are responsible for organizing and participating in events during the Mardi Gras season
10. **Lundi Gras**… *noun* **1:** translated to English as "Fat Monday", the informal title of the Monday before Mardi Gras day
11. **Maid**… *noun* **1:** a female member of a royal court chosen based on their father's provenance within the krewe **2:** a debutante who is "presented" to society through the *tableau* ritual who typically wears a costume gown
12. **Old-line krewes**… *noun* **1:** "elite, white, all-male organizations (most established in the 1870s) dedicated to producing spectacular Mardi Gras celebrations consisting of a seasonal public parade, masking, and a private grand ball. The oldest, most prestigious clubs – the Mistick Krewe of Comus, the Krewe of Proteus, the Knights of Momus, the Twelfth Night Revelers, and the civic-minded Rex" (Atkins, pp. 1)
13. **Page**… *noun* **1:** another member of the royal court, a young child who follows behind the king and queen during their *tableau* promenade
14. **Parade** (Mardi Gras) **….** *noun* **1:** a public procession of Mardi Gras *floats* through the streets of New Orleans
15. **Promenade**… *verb* **1:** to be escorted around a venue in front of a crowd
16. **Queen**… *noun* **1:** another member of the royal court, the queen chosen for the year is sometimes a secret, she is a partner to the king whose father is an influential member of the *krewe*

17. **Second-line**… *noun, adjective, or verb* **1:** used in Mardi Gras as a type of 'strut' that is typically done by a large group of people in a line to New Orleans brass music, members of the procession will often wave cloth or napkins in the air **2:** used after funerals the secondary group of people—uninvited or invited guests—follow behind a funeral hearse and brass band through the street (i.e. *as a noun* " I'm dancing in the second line") (i.e. *as an adjective* " I like that second line beat") (i.e. *as a verb* " It's so much fun to second line to this song")
18. **Tableau…** *noun* (plural is Tableaus) **1:** the formal presentation of the royal court to an audience **2:** the royal court's promenade around a large room in traditional costume
19. **Twelfth night**…. *noun* **1:** the night of the epiphany and the beginning of the Mardi Gras season

1.2 Problem Statement

By capturing the perspectives of key participants--such as dressmakers, maids, queens, and debutantes--the study seeks to provide valuable insights into the multifaceted experiences within Mardi Gras. Ultimately, Mardi Gras serves as a lens through which the values and identity of a cultural group are vividly expressed and perpetuated. Through traditional attire and the experiential aspects of wearing such costumes, individuals contribute to the ongoing narrative of Mardi Gras.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand the role of Mardi Gras costumes in young participants' personal, cultural, and social identity development. Additionally, the project aims to preserve the cultural heritage embedded in Mardi Gras traditions, particularly as the art of dressmaking faces challenges and the oral transmission of traditions becomes increasingly rare.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

- How do Mardi Gras maids, debutantes, and queens perceive their own culture through their Carnival costumes?
- How does the Mardi Gras costume experience influence participants' social and personal identity?

Literature Review

This section delves into the scholarly literature surrounding the role of Mardi Gras, outlining what previous researchers and historians have documented about its role in the cultural, social, and personal identity of the city's residents. To prepare for this investigation, the

researcher examined Mardi Gras histories, psychology and anthropology journals, newspaper clippings, photo analysis research, theses, dissertations, and a documentary. These works elucidated the history of the New Orleans Carnival, high society, social identity, exclusivity, liminality, and social power. Additionally, the writings illuminated a correlation between identity, culture, and dress.

2.1 History of Mardi Gras

One cannot grasp the New Orleans Carnival without understanding its structure, history, and vocabulary. The intricate history of New Orleans is characterized by racial tensions, contradictions, and social conflicts that have shaped the city's social fabric over time. Throughout the city's history, friction between Creoles and Americans, natives, and immigrants (Italians and Jews), men and women, and blacks and whites contributed to the social structure of the city. Carnival did not create these tensions, it served as a platform for their expression through art, music, and costume.

Mardi Gras holds a distinct vocabulary that reflects its unique cultural heritage (Mitchell, 1999). The Mardi Gras season aligns with the Catholic calendar of events. The season begins on Twelfth Night, the anniversary of the Three Wise Men's trip to Bethlehem to visit Jesus Christ. following his birth. The last day of the season is Mardi Gras Day, which translates to "Fat Tuesday", and represents a final display of exuberance. "Fat Tuesday" occurs on the eve of Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, a Catholic season of fasting and prayer (Madden, 1874).

New Orleans did not invent the concept of Carnival, but rather "reinvented" it. Derived from the Latin words "carne" and "vale", *Carnival* meant a "*farewell to the flesh*" (O'Brien, 1973, p. 114). Carnival was described as "differing from rituals in the further respect that they seem to be more flexibly responsive to social and even societal change in the major political and

economic structures" (Turner, 1979, pp. 475). Because of this flexible nature, New Orleans Carnival continued to "reinvent" itself every year. The basis of tradition in Carnival, however, was rooted in European, (French Catholics, Germans, and Spaniards), African, and Caribbean culture (Mitchell, 1999).

In the 1830s, civilians staged many masked balls, but none had yet been associated with the Carnival holiday. Inspired by Carnival clubs in Mobile, Alabama, the first Carnival organization, The *Mistick Krewe of Comus* formed in New Orleans (Cohen, 1951). By 1882, the *krewes* Momus, Rex, and Proteus followed (Richey, 1919). These original krewes of Mardi Gras were referred to as *old-line krewes;* they were the oldest and most prestigious Carnival organizations (Snedeker, 2006). By paying a yearly membership fee, *krewe* members could ride in a yearly parade, attend the ball, or *tableau*, or become members of the *royal court* for the year (O'Bryon, 2016). In each *krewe*, a *captain* was appointed. The captain was the manager of the organization. Unlike the royal court, the captain remained constant from year to year.

2.2 Structure of Krewes

The individual *krewe* organized two large events, the parade, and the *tableau.* Typically, the parade "rolled" first through the streets of New Orleans, followed by the *tableau* (the formal presentation), and lastly the ball (a large party at night). Not all krewes had the exact same *tableau* or costuming tradition; however, many elements were constant. The parade was for the public--- a celebration of floats, garish costumes, music, and dance on the streets of New Orleans. The *tableau* followed the parade. The *tableau* was the ceremony where the *royal court* was presented. It was a "display of the social elite to the social elite" (Mitchell, 1999, pp. 99). The *royal court* consisted of a king, queen, dukes, and maids, or debutantes. Some krewes chose to title the presentation of young women as "*debutante"*, and some chose the title "*maid".* The

two roles were very similar; both are the position held by young women before possibly becoming *queen*. There could only be one queen every year, but several debutantes or maids.

The *tableau*, unlike the parade, was in a semi-private space--- a ballroom, theater, auditorium, opera house, or arena (Mitchell, 1999). The ballroom was the canvas for the ceremony in which the royal court followed specific choreography. In the ballroom, the maids were escorted around the room by their *dukes* or fathers. In this ritual, members of the *royal court* walked, curtsied, and smiled at the crowd (Atkins, 2017). Invitations to these balls were given to members of the krewe or guests of the court with personal or political ties (Mitchell, 1999). Typically, the king and queen were costumed in white, regal dress with capes, scepters, and crowns. The maids either wore a formal white gown or an elaborate ball gown that encapsulated the theme of the year.

Once one Mardi Gras season ended, preparation for the next Mardi Gras almost immediately began (Richey, 1919). The captain traditionally plays a significant role. He chose a theme, voted on by the court (Cohen, 1952). The theme of the *tableau* was the first decision before planning the rest of the events. Nothing could be planned or created before the theme was chosen. Imaginative and fantastical themes drew people to Mardi Gras. Using a new kind of theater, themes transformed the traditional ball environment into a mystical world (Mitchell, 1999). After a theme is finalized, the captain and court leadership coordinate with the dress designer and float designer, while planning the *tableau* (Cohen, 1952).

2.2 Cultural Identity in Mardi Gras Traditions

Mardi Gras has served as a reflection of culture in New Orleans and a catalyst for change (Robert, 2006). Though the basic elements of New Orleans Carnival remain constant (parades, beads, balls, krewe, and royalty), Mardi Gras traditions are also instrumental in driving social

evolution (Robert, 2006). The evolution of Mardi Gras is exemplified by instances where society has confronted entrenched norms within traditional white, male old-line krewes. For instance, the establishment of the Krewe of Muses in 2000 marked a departure from the historical discouragement of women forming their own krewes, signifying a milestone in Carnival history.

Before forming the Krewe of Muses in 2000, women were discouraged from establishing their own krewe (Robert, 2006). As Jason Hardy (2006) notes:

> Staging the first successful women's night parade might sound like a meager accomplishment to tourists and novices, but the curious truth is that in all of Carnival history, it has never been done. (p. 319)

Similarly, the Krewe of Zulu challenged racial stereotypes by using Carnival traditions to satirize the history of segregation and oppression, by critiquing racial prejudices. In 1909, the krewe's original purpose was to present themselves as African-American stereotypes through costume, coconuts, and face paint. In Carnival fashion, the Krewe of Zulu 'poked fun' at the horrible history of segregation and oppression (Roach, 1993). Zulu "has always walked a thin line between ridiculing and reinforcing the imagery of abject racial hatred with which Mardi Gras in New Orleans is historically replete" (Roach, 1993, p. 50).

Progress towards inclusivity can also be seen in traditionally white krewes. On December 19, 1991, the city of New Orleans approved an ordinance denying parade permits to Carnival organizations unless they do not discriminate based on race, sex, sexual orientation, or age. During the local assembly, the krewes of Comus and Proteus refused to abide by these rules which meant they could not ride in the parade until they supported the ordinance (Vennman, 1993).

2.3 Cultural Identity in Mardi Gras Traditions

In the context of Mardi Gras, an individual's standing in the social hierarchy is determined by the wealth and prestige of the krewe (Ahrndt, 2015). Krewe membership in New Orleans serves as a means of communicating social class, a "grouping of individuals in a stratified hierarchy based on wealth, income, education, occupation, and social network" (Ahrndt, 2015, p. 83). When asked about how these old-line krewes play a role in society, Darlene Olivo, a photographer for the *Times Picayune,* explained to Snedeker (2006):

> Introducing women to society in the debutante is the cog and the wheel of what Mardi Gras is, and Mardi Gras is the thread in which the entire fabric of the city is woven. The men in these clubs are the ones who control a lot of what goes on in this city. They have a lot of power even though the (city) administration is middle-class and black. What happens as far as estate deals, bridges, those are controlled by the white aristocracy. (19:22)

Further, the *tableau* filled with gestures, fashioning, and music of the royal court's performance, is a way of communicating status, power, and tradition to other members of the society. *Plural reflexivity,* a phrase coined by Turner (1979), describes this phenomenon. Turner defines *plural reflexivity* as "the ways in which a group or community seeks to portray, understand, and then act on itself, or taking the form of a performance" (p. 456)

2.3 Evolution of Individual Identity in Mardi Gras Traditions

While these rituals of Mardi Gras have played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural and social structure of New Orleans, they have also had a profound impact on individual development. The Mardi Gras *tableau,* in particular, symbolizes a "coming of age" presentation, that embodies the concept of *liminality*. Victor Turner describes *liminality* as a word that expresses "being on a threshold." Previous research emphasized the idea of liminality comprised

of three stages: separated from ordinary social life, threshold, and re-aggregated through ritual---returning to everyday life at a higher or equal status. Rituals, like Carnival, can turn someone from one sociocultural state to the status of another (Turner, 1979).

Research suggested that there was no real consensus as to what this ritual exactly meant to participants. For some, the *tableau,* or ball, transforms their identity and instills them with a new sense of belonging. However, for some participants, the rituals of Mardi Gras imposed conformist ideals and restricted personal growth.

In an interview Eaustis Eaves, a past queen, explained being a queen was "about status… and status is a way of knowing who we are" (Snedeker, 2006, 46:01) In another interview with a member of an *old-line krewe*, he explained that this ritual was more than an exhibition of status, it "teaches you how to drink, manners, how to converse with adults, and write thank you letters" (Snedeker, 2006, 45:15).

Some participants found that the ritual negatively impacted self-growth and imposed conformist ideas on individuals. In a personal narrative of a past debutante Sarah O'Byron (2016), she said:

> As a debutante, my life was fodder to the Mardi Gras gods and publicity machines; my personality was rewritten against my will into that of a one dimensional pretty, Southern lady. I was not expected, or permitted, to bring originality to the events I attended. I was to be just like the other 50 ladies, interchangeable, facades of the New Orleans "High Society" debutante. I was forced into new clothes, into new groups of people, and into a new relation with myself. My singularity was sacrificed to my father. I was no longer Sara O'Bryon but my father's daughter. I was repurposed (pp.89).

2.4 Identity and Dress

This section delves into the scholarly literature surrounding identity and dress outside of the specific Mardi Gras context. By exploring these dimensions of identity and how they are construed, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate their identities within the broader cultural landscape.

2.4.1 Culture

Culture is a dynamic and evolving set of learned beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors that shape societal norms and practices. By analyzing culture within a society, researchers have gained deeper insights into the complexities of human behavior and social structures. Ahrndt (2015) further characterizes cultural groups as comprising individuals who share common beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors, underscoring the collective nature of cultural identity (Ahrndt, 2015).

2.4.2 Identity

Within the realm of identity, literature primarily examines three distinct categories: personal, social, and cultural identities.

Personal identity encompasses intrapersonal aspects of the self that are shaped by individual life experiences. In contrast, social identities are influenced by group memberships and evolve as individuals navigate various social contexts (Ahrndt, 2015). For instance, having an interest in Mardi Gras and residing in New Orleans could be indicative of personal identity, while joining the Krewe of Rex exemplifies a form of social identity. Cultural identities are rooted in socially constructed categories that dictate behavioral norms and ways of being, often established from birth (Ahrndt, 2015) and contributing to ethnic and group identities (Appiah, 2005).

2.4.3 Identity Formation

The literature underscores the multifaceted nature of identity formation, highlighting the intricate interplay between personal experiences, social affiliations, and cultural influences in shaping individuals' understanding of themselves and their place within society. The process of personal, social, and cultural identity formation involves a complex interplay of ascribed and avowed identities. Identity formation can be *ascribed*, placed on us by others, while *avowed* identities are self-ascribed (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Social constructionism is a theoretical framework positing that the concept of the "self" emerges through daily interactions with others (Allen, 2011). Factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability are socially constructed attributes that contribute to an individual's sense of self and how they are perceived within society (Ahrndt, 2015).

2.5 Identity and Dress

A large number of existing studies in the broader literature examined *clothing* as “a universal and visible cultural element consisting of sets of body symbols deliberately designed to convey messages at different social and psychological levels” (Kuper, 1973). Clothing can be seen as an outward expression, communication, or metaphor for identity. Unlike language, clothing does not directly communicate a message. The identity of the “self” is displayed through clothing (Davis, 2008). Moreover, clothing reflects class, and “class is one axis around which identities and cultures form. It does not exist apart from other axes--- gender, race, nation, sexuality, and so on.” (Lawler, 2005, pp. 804). Social status, identity, and commitment (support or protest) are also expressed through clothing—the cost, technology, and beauty.

Some authors suggested that *clothing* describes both *dress* and *costume.* The term *Costume,* clothing worn for ritual purposes, will be used in this study to describe the specific

dress worn by the royal Mardi Gras court (Kuper, 1973). The designs of the costumes were intentional and rooted in tradition. In an interview with Karen Leathem, a historian at the Louisiana State Museum, she explained the historical significance of regal costumes worn during *tableaus* or balls. The costumes and ball presentations began after the Civil War to "restore a sense of what they had been before the war" (Snedeker, 2006, 22:14). Members of old-line krewes romanticized the Antebellum version of themselves, white, powerful, and prestigious and sought to display this through costume during the *tableau* ceremony (Snedeker, 2006).

2.6 Conclusion

For two centuries the Mardi Gras *tableau* tradition played a significant role in shaping cultural, social, and personal identities of southern Louisiana residents. Charlotte Collins, a past queen, said, "Wearing a fancy gown affects how you feel inside and changes who you are when you wear it" (Snedeker, 2006, 8:25). Clothing, particularly Mardi Gras costume can transform identity in the inner "self." Crystals, a crown, and a ball gown enhance acceptance in a social group and continue practices set by a cultural group.

Because this research deals with a complex, extensive history of New Orleans Mardi Gras, the conclusions to this research may be equally as complex and undefined. In previous literature, there was no real consensus on what it meant to participate in the *tableau* tradition as a maid, queen, or debutante. Some believed it was more about social status, others valued the tradition, and some found it a negative experience. However, these varying perspectives and experiences all relate participation in the Mardi Gras ritual to a transformation of social, personal, and cultural identity in either a positive or negative way.

Methods and Materials

3.1 Introduction

Costume is an integral part of the Mardi Gras debutante tradition. In other studies, costume and dress were shown to play a role in identity development (Davis, 2008). Mardi Gras history has been heavily documented, but rarely researched. The research on Mardi Gras costumes mainly focuses on Mardi Gras Indians and rural Mardi Gras.

3.2 Reinstatement of Research Questions

- How do Mardi Gras maids, debutantes, and queens perceive their own culture through their Carnival costume?
- How does the Mardi Gras costume experience influence participants' social and personal identity?

3.3 Research Design

The study implemented a qualitative phenomenological method. According to phenomenological research, participants were asked in an interview setting to explain experiences as they perceived them (Donalek, 2004). Two instruments were used in the form of words and photographs (Bogdan, 2007). Following interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research, the researcher aimed to explore the participant's personal meaning of their Carnival experience (Smith, 2003). Photo-elicitation, or photo analysis, methods were combined with IPA methods in this study. Photo-elicitation, the study of photographs within an interview, better increased the participants' self-awareness and understanding of their lived experiences (Bates et al., 2017). By using a combination of both methods, the IPA method effectively allowed the researcher to better explore, interpret, and analyze the interview (Smith, 2003), whereas the use of photography accurately triggered memories and feelings of past experiences (Akaret, 1973).

3.4 Population and Sampling

The population of this study was women over the age of 18 who had participated in New Orleans Mardi Gras as a debutante, maid, or queen. Other members of the population were Mardi Gras costume designers who had created custom gowns for New Orleans Mardi Gras royalty. To create the sampling frame, purposeful sampling was mainly used to obtain participants for this study, along with snowball sampling. By using the "snowball" method, participants used their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in the interview process (Family Health International, 2003). Personal contacts, social media, and newspaper articles were also used in this study to obtain participants.

3.5 Rigor

Credibility

Peer debriefing, the process of presenting data to an outside person, added more credibility and rigor to this study. A qualitative researcher reviewed this study to reduce bias from the researcher. The debriefer focused on areas that needed improvement by critiquing the data collection method and coding process. They also helped to identify problems in the research and locate any assumptions made by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 2006).

Transferability

To give the study more transferability, as much detail was provided as possible. This was accomplished by providing readers with tangible evidence that the research study's findings can be valid in other contexts, situations, times, and populations. All of the interviews were documented with a transcript from each participant's full interview recording. Each of the participant's recordings was reviewed several times to not overlook any information when writing the transcript (Lincoln & Guba, 2006).

Dependability

An external auditor, a skilled researcher, reviewed the research process and provided comments. The external auditor provided rigor to this study by evaluating the accuracy of the researcher's methods and data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 2006).

Confirmability

The researcher used an audit trail, which added rigor to the study in the way it allowed for transparency. An audit trail is a collection of all the research materials. The documents included in the audit trail are a typed script for recruiting participants, an informed consent document, the typed interview questions, transcripts of the interviews, a spreadsheet of quantitative summaries for themes, demographic pages for participants, and documents related to IRB approval (see Appendix B)

Additionally, a reflexivity statement added confirmability to guide the direction of the investigation. (Lincoln & Guba, 2006).

Reflexivity Statement. Aside from identity, a driving factor of this tradition is an exhibition of social class. As someone who was presented as a maid at a Bayou region ball three years ago, I do not believe that all people participate in these practices for the sole reason of status. Some residents continue this tradition for liminality or coming-of-age purposes. While our Mardi Gras in our small bayou town is not quite as socially stratified as the balls in uptown New Orleans, it is still cost-prohibitive for many people and certainly can be viewed as elitist. Nevertheless, participating in the ball was something that I had looked forward to since I was a young girl. Much like an important birthday milestone, becoming a maid was a time to bring family and friends together to celebrate. It was a season of parties, dancing, anticipation, and gifts. My presentation was also a time to meet other young maids and a time to immerse myself in tradition. I learned dress-making traditions, how to write thank-you notes, how to properly

second-line, and speak to adults. Because of this experience, I got to be a part of something no other region of the world experiences, at least not in quite the same way. While it may seem elitist to an outsider, it gave me a sense of self and pride. I left the experience feeling even more connected to my French and Cajun roots.

Moreover, the researcher acknowledges her own potential bias. As stated in the reflexivity statement, her experience was positive, and she felt a strong sense of identity development through the experience. To reduce bias, she has taken precautions to be objective through her set of interview questions.

3.6 Instrumentation

In this study, the researcher used two instruments to assist in data collection, interviews and photo elicitation, or photo analysis (see Appendix C). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with an interview guide (Ary, 2010). The semi-structured format allowed for the participants to freely speak, and for the researcher to ask questions where they see fit. The interview was conducted face-to-face and via Zoom. The researcher recorded the interview to take note of the subject's overall attitude and mood.

Before the interview, the subjects were asked to bring photographs of themselves dressed in their Mardi Gras *tableau* costume. During the interview, the participants answered questions about their photos. The researcher prepared several questions before the interview to collect data from the debutantes, maids, queens, or dressmakers. All the questions are stated in the interview guide (Appendix D), but the questions proposed during the photo analysis portion of the interview are as follows:

- When looking at this photograph, how would you describe the difference that wearing this costume influenced your overall mood?

- How did wearing this costume make you feel about Mardi Gras and New Orleans tradition as a whole?
- What elements of the costume made you feel this way?
- How important is the continuation of this Mardi Gras dress tradition in New Orleans, to you?

General interview questions not mentioned above pertain to demographic information, emotions during the Mardi Gras season preceding the ball, feelings while wearing the costume during the ball, reflections after their participation, and personal stories of their experience. The questions the researcher asked the dressmakers slightly differed between the debutantes, maids, and queens, as questions were altered to fit participants' Carnival dress-making experience.

Participants also completed a pre-interview online demographic survey. The questionnaire presented general information about the research study, demographic questions, socioeconomic questions, informed consent, and specification of the participant's role in Carnival.

3.7 Data Collection and Analysis

Before collecting data, the student researcher sought approval from the institutional review board (Protocol #: 2211435945). The data was then collected by the researcher through interviews with past maids, past debutantes, past queens, and dressmakers who participated in the New Orleans Carnival tradition.

To collect proper interview data, the researcher followed a scholarly article written on conducting semi-structured interviews (Baumbusch, 2010). Like this study, the researcher formulated an interview guide to have a standard for asking questions. She then conducted a recorded interview of past maids, past debutantes, past queens, and dressmakers. The interviews

were in person and via Zoom and took roughly 1-2 hours. During the interview, a photo-elicitation was conducted to encourage discussion, generate memories, and enhance feelings about the subject (Baumbusch, 2010). Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings by hand and checked them for accuracy. She then reviewed the transcript herself, listening to the audio recording multiple times to ensure accuracy.

After the interview and transcription process were completed, the qualitative data analysis process began. Initially, the researcher planned to use an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. However, after reviewing the transcripts she found that the thematic analysis method would better synthesize both the emotional and visual data. Thematic analysis is a process of reviewing and communicating patterns in data. The theoretical framework employed is the 'contextualist' method, which acknowledges the process through which individuals derive meaning from their experiences, and simultaneously, the impact of the broader social context on their interpretations. This process is inductive and data-driven, allowing the text to present the themes, rather than having a constructed set of themes prior to the analysis. Moreover, it allows the unambiguous meanings of the data in a semantic approach to be presented, rather than analyzing the underlying meanings of the text (Victoria, 2006).

To properly analyze the material, the researcher read the transcript multiple times and noted preliminary thoughts. Then, the data was chronologically annotated with common themes, words, or phrases that grasped the essence of the participant's response to a research question. The themes were then grouped theoretically. Next, these themes were refined into categories and sub-categories. This coding style emphasized the larger themes within the interview. This process was repeated for all ten interviews. Lastly, all the participant's themes were observed for

commonalities (Victoria, 2006). The constant findings across the transcripts reflected the overall meanings of their personal experiences and related to the initial research questions.

4. Results

The study aimed to capture the dynamics of the Mardi Gras dressmaking tradition and its impact on the formation of social identity. The population of ten women with various roles within the Mardi Gras tradition (dressmakers, maids, queens, and debutantes) were interviewed. Following initial analysis of the transcribed data, the two women who wore white ballgowns as debutantes were removed from the sample. Only the costumed maids and queens, including two dressmakers who also participated as maids or queens, were included in the final sample, resulting in six participants from five different krewes. Three participants assumed roles as both a maid and queen and two women were a part of the same krewe, The Krewe of Aquila. During the interview, the women viewed photos of themselves in the costumes to jog their memories of how they felt wearing the gown. At the same time, the interviewer posed cultural questions about the development of social identity.

In the following sections, the researcher highlighted findings (a) regarding the Mardi Gras dressmaking tradition in New Orleans, (b) its variations across different krewes, and (c) its influence on the social identity of maids.

To maintain confidentiality, the real names of participants were replaced with pseudonyms. The pseudonyms were chosen to represent traditional Cajun French names. Selecting names that align with the cultural background or context of the participants, not only protects their identities but also respects their heritage and identity.

4.1 The Dressmaking Tradition

The Mardi Gras dressmaking tradition is a process that typically happens between the dressmaker, maid or queen, family of the maid or queen, and the krewe captain. Three dressmakers with diverse roles within the tradition were chosen as a sample to best explain this oral history. Two of the dressmakers, Renée and Angelique, worked together primarily on costume maid dresses, one as a primary designer and the other as a primary seamstress. Renée and Angelique are mother and daughter. In their positions, the two often collaborate and assist each other throughout the design process. Bernadette, the third dressmaker, focused her business on queen and debutante dresses. For the sake of this research, the researcher only documented Bernadette's impact on queen's dresses because debutantes were eliminated from the research sample.

4.1.1 The Costume

According to the dressmakers, planning for Mardi Gras typically began a year in advance, with the theme determining the costume designs for the year. The theme was integral to the Mardi Gras experience because it transformed the ball into a theatrical production. Bernadette emphasized the importance of elaborate costumes elevating the ball presentation, saying:

> It makes the ball. You're looking at the *tableau*. You're looking at the presentation and they're basically putting on a show. You need elaborate costumes. What I do is more of couture gowns but it's part of the visual impact of the ball--what they're wearing.

The captain, the head of operations within the krewe, chose the ball's theme for the Mardi Gras season. Though all the researched krewes had a captain, not all participated in the same tradition. Some captains' names are a secret, while some are disclosed. Renée spoke about her experience of meeting captains of various krewes:

> The captain of Sparta, his name is known. I have some captains, who nobody knows who they are. My Athenians and Mithras who I mentioned, no one knows who they are as captain. Not even the men who belong to the organization. Whereas (some maids) know who their captain is as a maid.

Traditionally, the costume itself reflected the theme that the captain chose for the year. A former queen within the Krewe of Apollo, Marie, explained her non-traditional approach to acquiring the theme during her reign as queen. Through a meaningful collaboration between Marie and her father, the two suggested a theme to the krewe's leadership. Marie revealed how her theme was conceived:

> So, my theme for the year, they had been trying to figure it out. They didn't really know. My dad and I listen to this radio station called *Yacht Rock Radio*. It's 70s soft rock. I was telling my dad about it, and he was like, "Wait that's a really great theme!" because they were moving (the ball) to the summer and it's a personal thing for you and (your daughter).

The chosen theme significantly influenced the design process for the dressmakers, Angelique and Renée. Once the theme was chosen the dressmakers faced the challenge of researching historical periods or cultural themes to inform their costume designs. Whether it's a more conventional theme like *Colonial Years* or an unconventional one like *Racetracks*, Renée delved deeply into fashion and cultural elements. Renée gave a brief explanation of the first stages and a typical timeline of the design process:

> If you have a costume ball and the captain has a theme, he then would call the one who's doing the design, which would be Angelique and I.

> Last week, we got a phone call, finally. I usually give them one month to get back with me. They're a little bit later this year. At the beginning of May, Angelique and I hear the theme. If Angelique has to do the research, she will be told the theme. It may be *ancient trade routes*. She, then, started researching eight ideas of different routes which was very educational. Then, she will start to come up with the ideas for dresses. Her and I will talk back and forth on what we can do and cannot do. Then by June she has a preliminary design.

Within the Krewe of Christopher, a costume ball located in a bayou town an hour away from New Orleans, the number of maids for the year determined the number of costume dresses. Since 1953, Christopher's theme for the year, such as *Racetracks*, acted as an overall category. However, each maid's design was an element of the overarching theme. For example, for *Racetracks*, one maid's dress was *Dubai* and another *New York*. Renée continued to explain the costume design process, stating:

> She (Angelique) will call the captain and say, "How do you feel about these eight designs with these eight themes" If he says yes, then she can go further with it. She and I will start to look for fabric.

Angelique, the primary designer, spoke about her creative process and theme research in-depth:

> Last year, I had to look back to history. (The Krewe of) Christopher's theme was *Colonial Years*, so I couldn't do anything different. I had to look at colonial-style clothing. The *Cities of Love* Year, I looked back to dresses centuries ago and saw what they were wearing at this time. I think, "How am I going to completely do this deep dig search into history?"

> We had one year where they were the *Racetracks*. I had to deep dig into what each area was doing and wearing. What do they wear in Dubai? What's the style there? Sometimes when they give me the theme, I think, what? Then, I start to realize. What is New York known for? Oh, okay, fur. I have to research not only the clothing but also the theme itself.

The queen's attire was different from the maid's costume. The queen wore a white gown with extravagant metallic details, such as gold or silver beading. For example, Brigitte, a past queen from the Krewe of Carrolton, was allowed to choose between silver and gold details on her dress.

Like other traditions between Mardi Gras krewes, the metallics chosen for the queen's dress vary. Renée elaborated on the different customs among different krewes:

> (The Krewe of) Sparta does the rotation between king and queen. (The Krewe of) Athenians does the rotation. My (Krewe of) Mithras does gold every year. If the girl wants to wear silver, she can. They have one long mantle and that's it. Whereas, Athenians have a silver and a gold. I think some of the other clubs (krewes) may. (The Krewe of) Comus was always in silver.

Aside from the dress itself, another aspect of the costume was the collar, also known as a "mantle". Renée's son specialized in the ornate mantles. The collar was described as wirework "covered with fabric or lace and decorated from there". The extravagant collars sometimes had plumes, decorative feathers. Blanche, a past maid in the krewe of Argus, spoke about her experience with the "big collar" or "mantle".

> There were so many things about it that felt so different and special. I'd say the mantle was the big thing that I felt was so cool. So, I was so excited to have one of my own.

4.1.2 The Fittings

The sketch is the first exposure the maids have to what they will be possibly wearing at the ball. Angelique, in reflecting on her own experience as a maid and a designer, said:

> When (the maids) first see their sketch with no one else around, it's so exciting. That feeling of 'It's happening!' For the girls, it's just starting. When they get to see their dress and they first go to Renée…It's just the movement of it happening. That's how it was for me when I was a maid.

Once the sketches were assigned, fittings began. Overall, the six participants experienced three to six fittings over a few months before the day of the *tableau*, or ball. Renée outlined her usual protocol and timeline for dress fittings:

> At least three to four. Sometimes they come in for measurements and sometimes (they) call-in measurements. The first fitting is done in lining. I mark the lining to get it perfect. The second fitting is done in the actual fabric. Depending on how detailed there may be a third one with everything finished or fourth one with everything finished. You need at least three or four fittings and that makes a tremendous difference.

Fittings played a crucial role in ensuring the perfect fit and execution of the designs. Bernadette emphasized the importance of fit as a key aspect of design:

> For me, in the beginning. It's the way I fit the dress that gets them excited. We're known for excellent fit. Tailoring and sculpting the dresses. Another thing we do is our dresses build a foundation. There's a boned canvas foundation inside the dress. The crinoline is all built-in and the muslin layer is over it from fitting. We have a paper pattern that we

> cut the muslin out of and we take it off and cut the muslin pattern out of silk. We lay it over the dress.

4.1.3 The Meaning

For Renée, her profession is more than making a beautiful gown. She views her involvement as a privilege, allowing her to be a part of a transformative experience for many young women. She expressed gratitude for being able to fulfill dreams through costume portrayal and recognized the significance of Mardi Gras in the lives of participants:

> I'm very lucky, though, because I meet a lot of people that (feel) it's a dream come true. They've waited for a lifetime. A lot of the girls have been ladies in waiting or pages and have looked up at the older girls. Now they get to be a maid or queen. It is a dream for them. Life is very difficult; you have to hang on to the good moments. The fact that I can give these good moments to so many people. I'm very lucky.

Bernadette indicated that costume design was not only a profession but was also a vital connection to history and a source of inspiration for the future. She said:

> It's what I love. It's my passion. It's my means of earning a living. It's history, it's future. It's so much of what I do.

In contrast, Angelique lamented the decline of handcrafted costume design, noting that fewer skilled seamstresses are continuing the tradition. She hinted at the reality of mass-produced alternatives and emphasized the unique beauty and significance of handmade, cultural art forms:

> It's a dying art also. My mom (Renée) is one of the last. It's one of the last of many that we watched pass away. Sans (a previous dressmaker), that I knew has passed. There's no new generation coming in to do the sewing. I really do think that makes a huge

difference. There is someone who is hand-sewing the costumes. Another artist coming in and adding extra.

This is a handmade dress that's like a painting. You're adding more to the palette to make it more and add more. It has to be because when lights hit it, it has to shine. It must stand out and pop, so people are like, 'Woah.'

4.2 Traditions – A Case Study of Argus and Zulu

Within this case study, the researcher chose to focus on the experiences of two women, Margeaux and. Blanche, within two krewes, Zulu and Argus. Margeaux was a maid in Zulu, a primarily African-American krewe based in the city limits of New Orleans. Blanche was previously a maid in Argus, a primarily white Metairie-based krewe located in New Orleans's largest suburb.

Back in the 1800s, Mardi Gras revolved around the celebration of Carnival (Cohen, 1951). This celebratory act was expressed through tradition, such as the parade and the *tableau* (the ball). This fundamental essence remained consistent across all krewes participating in Mardi Gras celebrations; however, what distinguished each krewe from another was its unique set of traditions, customs, and rituals that reflected their histories, values, and community identities.

The process of selecting royalty, the types of events held within the krewe during the Mardi Gras season, and the preparation during the season differed from one krewe to another. From the perspective of Margeaux and Blanche, the traditions of the The Krewe of Zulu and Argus were explored for likeliness and variances.

4.2.1 Acquisition- Margeaux (Zulu)

For each krewe, the royalty for the year often served as ambassadors for their krewe, embodying its spirit and values throughout the festivities. Margeaux explained her experience of royalty selection within Zulu:

> We filled out an application to become a maid in 2017. You apply to be a maid or duchess or anything in Mardi Gras the year before so you can start getting prepared. The first thing that we did was training in August. That's about 6 months before.

4.2.2 Preparation- Margeaux (Zulu) vs. Blanche (Argus)

Both Margeaux and Blanche attended practice leading up to the ball. Every Saturday during Mardi Gras season, Margeaux practiced her entrance to the Zulu ball, pliés throughout the presentations, and the waltz, a dance she would perform with her duke at the ball. Whereas, Blanche only had one rehearsal where they were told to take "polite" steps and instructed on how to walk around the stage.

4.2.3 Announcement- Margeaux (Zulu) vs. Blanche (Argus)

In addition to the unique way each krewe prepared for the ball, they also have their own distinctive traditions. These customs were passed down through generations, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity within the krewe's community. As a Zulu maid, Margeaux participated in an umbrella contest and maid's brunch. Umbrellas were decorated for *second-lining,* a cultural style of dance that consisted of strutting in a line and waving an object (umbrella or napkin) above your head:

> We specifically used (the umbrellas) at the maid's brunch. It was basically an introduction before the ball to all of your family, and friends to commemorate you. The Zulu king and queen are there. It's kind of like a press conference setup even though it's

> not formal. There's a stage and we (maids) all sit in one line they come and serve us everything and there's everyone in the audience admiring us.

During Blanche's experience, Argus introduced her participation differently. Instead of a brunch, she participated in a coronation ceremony. Blanche's first event announced her involvement as royalty:

> The first big thing was the coronation, which happened in September. This is where we wear the white dresses and get crowned. Wasn't super exciting but we walked with our dads and they presented us. It's technically a secret who the court is until this point but not super intense.

4.2.4 Traditions- Margeaux (Zulu)

Apart from the announcement of the court, Margeaux explained another longstanding Zulu tradition, hand-painted and hallowed coconuts. Zulu's most notable parade "throw", an object thrown by individuals in the parade to the crowd, is the coconut. The origins of this tradition are not entirely clear, but Margeaux explained how the coconut tradition was passed down to her:

> When (in 1909) (Backnell, 2009) we first began doing Zulu as a parade, they didn't have a lot of money for the throws. Naturally starting up something new, you're starting with the little you have. The coconuts were very cheap and it was very easy to do so they would drain and decorate them so that became our signature.

Though the monetary value had much to do with the tradition, historians note that New Orleans played a major role as a port for Latin American products, which largely contributed to the tradition. Margeaux recounts her process of painting coconuts:

> (Before the parade) I had about 200 coconuts to paint. I was overwhelmed because it was a lot of coconuts. 'How am I going to paint all of these coconuts?' I got some family members together to come over. It was so cool that each coconut had a design on it. Knowing that it would sit in someone's house on their (fireplace) mantle. This is going to be a very important memory for them. Knowing that was very humbling and I was so appreciative.

However, not all traditions are without controversy. One such tradition, as recounted by Margeaux, involves parade members being required to wear "blackface" unless they were designated as maids or duchesses. In 1910, the early Zulu costume was inspired by the skit "There Never Was and Will Never Be a King Like Me" where the characters dressed in blackface, a practice often found in vaudeville theater among both black and white performers. (Backnell, 2009) Margeaux explained her position on the tradition:

> They paint your face black. I understood why they did it. It's a part of the culture of the parade and that's why they continue to do it. It kind of makes me uncomfortable. I understand why we do it, though. I understand that it's a part of our culture.

Though blackface began as a part of a theatrical costume and evolved into a Mardi Gras costume tradition, it has also been used as a form of racism. For centuries, racial discrimination and inequality was a significant issue in the United States, particularly the American South. White Americans historically enjoyed more privileges and rights compared to African-Americans, who were largely descendants of African slaves forcibly brought to the United States and subjected to slavery. These enslaved individuals were often seen by white Americans as unintelligent, indolent, and uneducated. During the nineteenth century, a prevalent form of entertainment known as blackface minstrels emerged, where white performers painted with

blackface makeup depicted derogatory caricatures of African-Americans, reflecting deep-seated racial prejudices and discrimination. (Amhed, 2016)

Margeaux understood the complexity inherent in this tradition by saying, “Even though it is uncomfortable, we have to talk about it. It’s a reminder. It’s a conversation starter.”

4.2.5 The Meeting of the Courts- Margeaux (Zulu) and Blanche (Argus)

Though the two krewes celebrate the Mardi Gras season differently, the Krewe of Argus and Zulu share one longstanding tradition with ‘the meeting of the courts’ on Lundi Gras, the Monday before Mardi Gras. Blanche explained the parade tradition:

> In old Kenner, we meet with the Krewe of Zulu. They do a meeting of the New Orleans parades and the big Metairie parade. The NOLA parades and Metairie meet, and there’s cultural significance. There’s a whole event. The same day, the queen and king are gifted a key to the city so there’s a private party with Zulu.

The Meeting of the Courts ceremony on Lundi Gras has taken place for the last 25 years within the city of Kenner, a suburb of New Orleans. The event represents unity between the two krewes where Kenner’s major conducts a second-line parade and toasts the royalty (Lundi Gras, n.d.).

4.2.6 The Meaning- Margeaux (Zulu) and Blanche (Argus)

Though similar and different in their traditions, the two maids both left the experience feeling a deep connection with their krewe. Margeaux said her participation was a way to celebrate her African-American heritage:

> I definitely think Zulu became more special to me. I’ve always gone to Zulu parades growing up. I felt immersed in Zulu culture. I learned more about the parade and history of it. I’m most proud that it’s a parade of primarily African Americans. It’s something

> that's positive representing our community. I'm really appreciative that we have those spaces for our community that are positive and not negative.

Blanche left the experience with pride and a deeper sense of loyalty towards her krewe:

> Any time you participate in something like that I think you get a little of it. For that Mardi Gras season, I was kind of branded with my krewe 'Argus'. That was my thing. Even today, when you ask my favorite parade, I can't just not say it. Even though there's New Orleans parades I like more, I will always have an attachment to that krewe and the whole experience it gave me.

4.3 Social Identity

The interplay of family ties, krewe associations, gender norms, and socioeconomic status emerged as pivotal factors shaping individuals' social identities, as illuminated by the narratives of the six women. These subthemes constituted integral components of individuals' social identity. The primary focus of this discussion was to examine the relationship between social identity and liminality, as well as between social identity and social capital. Additionally, the sections below explored the variations introduced by these minor themes on the major themes identified among participants from diverse socio-economic statuses within the broader community.

Across the sample, the maid's social identities were influenced by participating in the Mardi Gras dressmaking tradition. Their sense of belonging and pride was closely tied to their involvement in this tradition. The formation of the social identity of Mardi Gras participants was formed through membership in the krewe, through other krewe members, or family members. Wearing Mardi Gras costumes symbolized membership in a unique and exclusive community, and evoked feelings of camaraderie and significance.

Though Mardi Gras tradition had a personal impact on the participants, it also had a large significance throughout the state of Louisiana. Angelique emphasized the importance of the ball tradition for personal growth and the cultural makeup of Louisiana. She expressed the balls as the heart of Mardi Gras tradition. She said:

> We need these balls. The parades are great. These balls, traditions. Opportunities for ladies and gentlemen to learn how to walk with proper etiquette. It sounds silly, but why would you want to stop having (them)? If we stop, you won't have the artists making the costumes and contributing to tradition. It's Louisiana. It's who we are. If we lose it, what's going to happen? Will we just have guys in random costumes throwing beads at us? Will there be no maids in (the Krewe of) Endymion? It's important to keep all of this.

Marie succinctly captured her sentiment by stating, "At the end of the day, it's a part of our identity... No one outside of here truly understands."

Eighty-three percent of participants noted that participating in the Mardi Gras ball tradition reinforced their connection to the community. When asked about how the costume contributed to her experience, Blanche said:

> I felt so a part of something. Not just Argus. I felt like a member of something so few people get to do, but it was such a binding thing for anyone who has done it. Especially the costume was such a big symbol for me. I remember being so upset when I had to take it off for the last time.

As a dressmaker, Renée highlighted the transformative power of costumes, suggesting that wearing them allowed individuals to temporarily adopt different identities and escape their own realities. She said, "The costume makes you realize you can be someone else if you don't

like who you are." For Margeaux, the costume was different from any other dress she's worn because it was a symbol of who she sees herself to be in the future, proclaiming:

> It's more than just a dress. When I put on any other semi-formal dress, I just want to look nice, presentable, and pretty. When I put this dress on, I am reminded of what I'm going after in my life, what my goals are, and what I'm pursuing. I'm reminded that I always have to represent myself with grace and class. This dress just embodies that. It's very different. There's nothing like this dress.

Participating in Mardi Gras as a maid or queen typically consisted of multiple social events throughout the Mardi Gras season. Blanche experienced social growth through the Mardi Gras season which led to a change of identity, stating:

> When it came around to the coronation, it was the first time I had met the girls. They were all much cooler than me, so I was so nervous. I just had the reputation of being smart in high school. I was one of (my high school's) valedictorians I very much had that reputation. In my mind, I wasn't cool and I was smart. That was my identity.

Blanche then elaborated on how the Mardi Gras experience changed how she identified herself saying, "It pushed me to realize I didn't just have to fit into one box."

4.3.1 Liminality

Liminality refers to a state of transition or ambiguity, often occurring during a period of change where individuals or groups are in between two distinct stages or statuses (Turner, 1979). In the study, participants identified participation in the Mardi Gras dressmaking tradition as a significant moment of liminality, symbolizing a transitional phase, and contributing to the accumulation of social capital. However, the impact of this tradition varied among participants based on their cultural background and the specific krewe to which they belonged.

For five of the six participants, wearing Mardi Gras costumes and participating in the Mardi Gras tradition marked a significant transition or milestone in their lives. Renée believed that the presentation experience came at a pivotal moment in development:

> Growing up. It's a milestone. You realize that you're going to be important. No matter who you are you should know you will be important. I'm not just a kid in the back of the school; I'm important.

The tradition unfolds during a formative "in-between" phase, typically among young-adult women on the verge of adulthood from the ages of 17-20 (Dessens, 2018), where many women's life opportunities include further academic decisions and vocational choices. According to *Mental Health Promotion,* this period is marked by significant changes in physical development, social relations, and identity (Chambers, 2007). For some participants being in the limelight during this transitional phase was valuable, Marie experienced this during her time as a queen, and expressed that it improved her self-esteem:

> It showed me how valuable I am that I was given that honor. Also, I think sometimes you feel that you're not as valued as you should be, and I didn't see. I had a lot of friends in high school, but I wasn't the most popular person ever. I felt like I wasn't recognized a lot. So, I think I improved my self-esteem.

In addition, five of the six participants spoke about feeling more confident towards the end of the dressmaking experience, during, or after the costume presentation. When talking about her own experience as a maid, Blanche said:

> I'd say I felt more confident. I felt like people were paying attention. Growing up, always seeing the maids and queens, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, they're so pretty and so cool.' I always wanted to be that. When I was in that position, I think especially with the mantle

> on, it was just like, 'Oh my gosh, I've gotten to be what I always looked up to and wanted to be.' So, I definitely think I felt a sense of empowerment.
>
> * * *
>
> I do think it was a formative thing for me that gave me a lot of confidence that I didn't have prior. I was really insecure growing up, and so I tended to hide myself in the back and didn't want people to look at me. It gave me the opportunity to see that people don't look at me with disgust when they see me. They were there to be there and support me.

4.3.2 Social Capital

According to the book *Social Capital*, social capital is defined as "the creation of networks and trust" (Social Capital, n.d.). In this section, the term "social capital" was chosen because it provided a clearer explanation of the experiences of maids and queens compared to the terms mentioned in the literature review. In the context of Mardi Gras, the theme of social capital emerged as participants expressed their appreciation for their hometown and its unique cultural heritage.

Through participant testimonials and thematic analysis, it was evident that Mardi Gras participation played a vital role in shaping social identity and fostering a sense of belonging within the community. Blanche discussed leaving the Mardi Gras ball tradition with a greater sense of attachment within New Orleans:

> I have a much greater appreciation for home and what home means. This year I came back home for Mardi Gras and part of the reason I care so much is because I was a maid. I definitely think it made home mean more. When I talk to people out of state no one understands that. I have a greater appreciation and value of home. How great it is and how different New Orleans is from everywhere else. There's nowhere else you can go to and feel that same thing.

> Mardi Gras alone is so unifying. It's the one time where everyone comes together for one thing. I feel like bad things can't happen. It's such a cultural pride and no one else will fully understand my experience is really special.

When Margeaux was asked about the feelings she had when she put on her costume for the first time, she expressed that she developed a sense of family identity:

> It was like a full-circle moment if that makes sense. Everything I had known about Mardi Gras, seeing my grandfather in the balls, going to parades, seeing my mother at parades. I understood it. I felt like I was able to connect with them on a level I had never connected to before because we had shared something.

4.3.3 Membership Acquisition

The financial aspect of this experience cannot be overlooked, two interviewees mentioned the financial strain upholding this tradition caused. Brigitte discussed:

> There's usually a small pool of people that can do something like this. Financially, I think it was just a family affair. Everyone pitched in and did the damn thing!

Additionally, Margeaux illustrated that the Mardi Gras tradition transcends monetary status, highlighting the deep-rooted value placed on upholding and preserving the tradition within families, stating:

> It's bigger than just money. Even though you are paying a lot of money, it's kind of worth it. Our experiences shape us.

The acquisition of membership in the context of the Mardi Gras dressmaking tradition transcends mere wealth and status, reflecting a deeper social dynamic that contributes to the accumulation of social capital. The term social capital also encompasses the resources embedded

within social networks, such as family connections (Social Capital, n.d.) The findings revealed that fifty percent of participants were “born into the role,” indicating a hereditary of familial aspect to membership acquisition.

In contrast, another substantial group of participants described unique paths to obtaining membership, showcasing diverse and non-traditional routes to inclusion. For example, three individuals recalled instances of sponsorship by existing members, highlighting the importance of social connections and networks in gaining entry to these exclusive circles. These variations in the acquisition of membership highlight the intricate social processes at play and their implications for the accumulation of social capital within the community.

5.0 Conclusion

Mardi Gras costumes impacted the social identity of the individuals studied, highlighting how cultural practices shape identity and promote personal growth. Through listening to the women's narratives, we gained deeper insights into how their participation in Mardi Gras traditions as maids or queens in the royal court influenced their self-perception and sense of belonging to the community. The use of photo-elicitation enriched our understanding by capturing emotions, detailed experiences, and oral traditions, enabling us to explore the profound significance of the Mardi Gras tradition beyond its visible symbols and comprehend its effects on memory, emotion, and identity.

Beyond the external transformation facilitated by adornments of Southern beauty like mantles, crystals, hoop skirts, crowns, and scepters, the Mardi Gras costuming experience resonated deeply with participants. For many of the women, the Mardi Gras tradition served as a pivotal moment, boosting their confidence, helping them adopt new roles, and strengthening their ties to their heritage and community. When asked about what made Mardi Gras special

from other coming-of-age presentation traditions, Marie declared, “Here, it’s a performance. Everywhere else, it’s just a presentation.” However, the meaning of this tradition transcends the outward performance. In this investigation, the majority of the women expressed that these costumes, coupled with traditional Mardi Gras practices, transformed their identity. Each woman’s identity was affected in different ways. To some, participating in this tradition represented a milestone, increased their confidence, allowed them to achieve a new persona, and enhanced their feelings of belonging in their community. For multiple women, these rich Mardi Gras traditions provided a framework for understanding one’s place within a community and contributed to a sense of belonging across generations. Additionally, the costuming tradition carries a particular significance as they navigate their transition from adolescence to adulthood.

For our interviewees, the Mardi Gras tradition was more than just a source of personal fulfillment and community celebration; it was also a reflection of Louisiana's unique cultural identity and spirit of unity. The Mardi Gras tradition holds personal and societal importance. Whether it's the sense of accomplishment gained from participating in the *tableau*, the joy of celebrating, or the connections with friends and family during the season, Mardi Gras allows individuals to culturally express themselves, reconnect with their roots, and form bonds across various communities. It is a cornerstone of Louisiana's cultural identity, expressing its history, heritage, and spirit of community. Beyond being a mere event, Mardi Gras represents a collective celebration of Louisiana's unique culture and traditions, uniting people from all walks of life in a shared celebration of identity and belonging.

5.1 Limitations

The limited racial diversity within the study group, five Caucasian women and one African-American woman is a crucial aspect to consider due to its implications on the

generalizability and richness of the data collected. The experiences and perspectives of individuals from different racial backgrounds can significantly influence the understanding of cultural practices such as Mardi Gras and their impact on personal identity and community belonging.

Additionally, the mention of a personal connection to religion for one participant, particularly concerning an event where their pastor prayed over them during Mardi Gras, highlights the potential religious dimensions of the tradition that were not fully explored in this research. Because the researcher did not ask religious-based questions, the religious implications of Mardi Gras were limited. This oversight underscores the importance of considering various cultural, social, and religious factors that may influence individuals' experiences and perceptions of Mardi Gras. By acknowledging and incorporating these aspects into future research inquiries, scholars can uncover deeper layers of meaning and significance associated with Mardi Gras and its role in shaping personal identity and community ties.

5.2 Future Directions

The implications of this study could benefit social science researchers of emerging adults and the greater body of Mardi Gras. To enhance the impact of this research, future studies could expand beyond the scope of traditional Mardi Gras celebrations to include other cultural traditions and similar festive practices. For example, exploring activities like the “mummers” in Philadelphia could provide valuable insights and comparative analyses that enrich our understanding of cultural events and their societal significance.

Further exploration of the limitations in the data such as race and religion presents an opportunity for researchers to capture a broader range of experiences and insights. By addressing these gaps through more inclusive and diverse sampling techniques, researchers can capture a

wider array of perspectives and shed light on the complexities of identity formation and cultural expression Further, by investigating the religious implications of Mardi Gras, future research can enrich our understanding of how this tradition intersects with different aspects of identity, belief systems, and community practices.

Recognizing the power of costume as a form of cultural engagement, researchers and practitioners can better appreciate how fashion intersects with personal identity. Embracing this understanding, efforts can be made to create environments that empower young women to express their cultural identities, preserve traditions, and navigate the complexities of identity formation. This holistic approach not only enriches our comprehension of cultural practices like Mardi Gras but also fosters a more inclusive and empowering environment for individuals to explore and celebrate their cultural heritage.

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This work was supported by a University of Arkansas Honors College research grant.

Appendix B

IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

To:	Celeste Nicole Falgoust
From:	Douglas J Adams, Chair IRB Expedited Review
Date:	02/27/2023
Action:	**Exemption Granted**
Action Date:	02/27/2023
Protocol #:	2211435945
Study Title:	A photo-elicitation of the New Orleans Mardi Gras costume tradition and an exploration of the impact this tradition has on the identity of participants

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Stephanie K Hubert, Investigator

Appendix C

Approved Interview Questions

Debutante/ Maid/ Queen Interview Guide

Introductory Remarks:

- My name is Celeste Falgoust. I appreciate you meeting with me.
- I would like to ask you some questions about New Orleans' Mardi Gras Tradition: some experiences you've had, how participation in the events impacted you and your thoughts pertaining to your involvement as a (maid/ debutante/ queen) in the krewe of _____. I also asked you to bring a photograph reminding you of the time you participated in the Mardi Gras ball. I'll be asking questions about that as well.
- I hope to use this information to support my honors thesis research.
- The interview should take 30 mins to an hour. Are you available to answer some Questions at this time?

Body

- Demographic information
    - How long have you lived in the New Orleans area?
        - Has your family always lived in the New Orleans area?
        - In what part of the New Orleans area did you grow up?
        - How would you describe your family's relationship to the city of New Orleans?
        - How would you describe your family's relationship to Mardi Gras specifically? How important are the holiday and traditions?
        - Do you remember when your first Mardi Gras memory was formed? Could you please describe it to me?
        - How do you feel about Mardi Gras?
        - Who most influenced your opinion and participation in Mardi Gras events?
- Questions pertaining to ball
    - Tell me about your experience as a (maid/debutante/ queen)?
        - Before the ball
            - When did you know you would participate in this tradition as a (maid/debutante/queen)?
            - How old were you when you first attended a Mardi Gras ball?
            - How did you participate in this event? How did you become a member of the krewe of _____?
            - What were the steps or preparation involved to becoming a maid/debutante/queen?
            - Tell me about the dressmaking process.
                - When did the process begin?

        - Did you get to pick your dress design?
        - What choices did you get to make in the design of your dress?
        - How did it feel when you attended appointments?
        - Do you remember when your dress was completed, what did that feel like?
    - Do you remember what type of events you participated in after 12th night to the ball? What about them did you enjoy
- During Ball
    - How did you feel on stage?
    - What was it like hearing members of the krewe cheer you on?
    - What elements of the tradition made you feel this way? (i.e. dress, walk, choreography)

- Photograph questions
    - When looking at this photograph, how would you describe the difference wearing this gown influenced your overall mood?
    - How did wearing this gown make you feel about Mardi Gras and New Orleans tradition as a whole?
    - What elements of the costume made you feel this way?
    - How important is the continuation of this Mardi Gras dress tradition in New Orleans, to you?
- Research questions
    - Balls as a milestone/ social identity
        - Describe how you felt as a member of the Krewe of ____ before vs after being a member of the royal court.
        - Do you feel this ritual was a milestone for you?
        - How do you feel being a queen/maid/debutante affected your feeling as a member of the krewe?
        - How do you feel the costume contributed to this?
        - How did this experience help you grow?
        - Did you experience some social growth?
            - Were you generally more outgoing after the experience?
            - Did you make new friends?
            - Did it make you more comfortable around adults?
            - Did it teach you how to drink, better manners, how to write thank you letters?
    - Cultural identity
        - Please describe the cultural traditions and rituals you participated in.
        - Did participating in Mardi Gras events as a ____ make you feel more in touch with your culture?
        - How do you believe this ritual influenced your attitudes or values?
        - Do you think it influenced you beliefs or behaviors?
        - How did the costume contribute to this?
    - Have your opinions or beliefs changed since then?
    - Was there anything that you did not enjoy?
    - Privilege Questions

        - Did the experience make you feel privileged?
        - What was it like having friends that did not participate in the tradition?

Closing

- I appreciate the time you took for this interview.
- What is one piece of advice would you give to others?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me that could be helpful in my research during this interview?

Dress Designer Interview Guide

Introductory Remarks:

- My name is Celeste Falgoust. I appreciate you meeting with me.
- I would like to ask you some questions about your story of becoming a designer, what the costume means to you and to Mardi Gras, and your perception of the maids and queens during consultations.
- I hope to use this information to support my honors thesis research.
- The interview should take 30 mins to an hour. Are you available to answer some Questions at this time?

Body

- General demographic information
    - How long have you lived in New Orleans?
        - Has your family always lived in New Orleans?
        - How would you describe your family's relationship to New Orleans, Mardi Gras specifically? How important is the holiday and traditions?
        - What is Mardi Gras to you? What do you most associate with Mardi Gras? (i.e. Parades, balls, parties, family, friends?
    - Give me a brief timeline of what led you to becoming a dress maker in New Orleans Mardi Gras?
        - Who most influenced your opinion and participation as a dressmaker in Mardi Gras events?
        - When did you begin designing and creating?
- Questions pertaining to ball
        - Walk me through the design process and preparation for the event.
            - How does the preparation work? When do you being sketching, choosing a theme, etc.?
        - How did/ do you feel when creating these gowns?
    - Tell me about the details of the dressmaking process.
        - Talk me through the construction.
    - Maid's response and reflection
        - How do the women respond during consultations?

        - What elements of the costume do the maids/queens/debutantes get the most excited about?
        - How do you feel like these elements contribute to their overall mood?
        - How you these young women act before and after the dress is finished?
        - Have you noticed a change in your clients from the first appointment to the last?
        - How important is the continuation of this tradition to you?
        - How does this profession influence your feeling towards Mardi Gras?
        - Do you feel this event is a milestone for young female?
- General questions
    - How do you feel being a dressmaker affects your relationship with the holiday?
    - Does creating dresses in Mardi Gras events as a ____ make you feel more in touch with your culture?
    - Do you feel it influenced your attitudes and values?
        - beliefs, and behaviors?
    - Do you think the Mardi Gras experience would be complete without the costumes?
    - How do you feel the costume contributes to your feeling (as well as the maids/queens/debutantes) as a 'member of the tradition'?
    - How would you describe the ball ritual's place in society?
    - Is there anything you don't enjoy?

Closing

- I appreciate the time you took for this interview.
- Is there anything else you would like to say that could be helpful in my research during this interview?

Appendix D

Basic History of Mentioned Krewes

The information was obtained through newspaper articles, journal articles, and the krewes' websites.

1. **The Knights of Sparta**… Established as a ball in 1951, New Orleans-based krewe (About, 2024)
2. **The Krewe of Apollo** … Established in 1929, a New Orleans-based krewe, the ball is staged on "the Saturday following the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6th) (Nolan, 2021)
3. **The Krewe of Aquila**… Established in 1976, a Metarie-based krewe, no longer an organization since 2009 (MardiGrasParadeSchedule.com, n.d.)
4. **The Krewe of Argus** … Established in 1972 by Jefferson Parish businessmen, a Metairie-based krewe, the Parade rolls on Mardi Gras Day (Krewe of Argus, n.d.)
5. **The Krewe of Athenians** … Established in 1909 (DeMulling, 2017)
6. **The Krewe of Carrolton** … Established in 1924 by a group of Oak Street businessmen, a New Orleans-based krewe, the fourth oldest Carnival parading organization (About, n.d.)
7. **The Krewe of Christopher** … Established in 1953, a Thibodaux-based krewe (Tableau, n. d.)
8. **The Krewe of Endymion**…Established in 1967, a New Orleans-based krewe, one of three "Super Krewes" (Home, n.d.)
9. **The Krewe of Mithras** … Established in 1897, a New Orleans-based krewe (Nolan, 2024)

10. **The Krewe of Muses**… Established in 2001 as a parading organization, an all-female parade in uptown New Orleans, most famous for throwing decorated shoes (Krewe of Muses, 2024)
11. **The Krewe of Proteus** …Established in 1882, a New Orleans-based krewe, the second oldest Carnival parading organization (Krewe of Proteus, n.d.*)*
12. **The Mistik Krewe of Comus** … Established in 1857, a New Orleans-based krewe, the oldest continually active Carnival organization (Koolsbergen, 1989)
13. **Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club**… Established in 1909 as a marching club, a New-Orleans-based krewe (Backnell, 2009)